More than anything

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by diushek

Summary

For a long moment, Shen Yuan stares into empty space almost sightlessly, trying to understand what the hell is going on.
Then, the boy finally sits up shakily. His eyes are as dark as pitch black, with a firm gaze that's too hard for a boy his age. His hair is a thick, dark, and dense tangle, escaping from his high ponytail in unruly strands. Despite how wild his hair makes him look, there's a delicate beauty mark under his eye.
In the center of his forehead, Shen Yuan stares in stupefied horror at a red zuiyin that he knows very well.

A half-Heavenly Demon child emerges from a dark portal in the middle of Shen Yuan's apartment. Fine, Shen Yuan can handle it. He'll just have to take care of little Luo Chengle, one of Luo Binghe's sons, until his father comes to pick him up. Luo Binghe couldn't possibly take too long to search for his own son, right?
...Right?

Notes

If I told you I actually had writer's block but at the same time I wrote three chapters of this fic (but can't write a word of everything else I have on wips), would you believe me? :D

Anyway !!! Thanks to the anonymous tumblr user for helping me name Luo Chengle, with:
晟 (chéng) meaning "clear, bright; splendor, brightness"
and 乐 (lè) meaning "amused, glad, cheerful, happy; enjoy; music"

With them addition: "If he is Liu Mingyan's son, I think she'd try to honour her brother (song in his name and music in the son's) and maybe even her hope for the future / her hope for her son's future? (clear and bright)", which I honestly consider PERFECT

...yes, the title is from a Hazbin Hotel song. Please don't judge me, it makes me very emotional and I couldn't find a better title

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Through an otherworldly portal

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: blood + young child in danger, dangerous qi deviation, sick child, and Shen Yuan being a damn careless person with his own health like always

I hope you enjoy the chapter! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The crash that resonates through the living room is so loud that Shen Yuan, for a moment, thinks his damn ceiling has collapsed. Which makes no sense at all: the man who lives upstairs is an office worker with an average eight-hour workday and an active social life who is never home. There would be no reason or justification for him to have something so heavy or a defect so severe that his floor (and, of course, the ceiling of Shen Yuan's living room) would give way and collapse.

So, when Shen Yuan jumps up from his desk, leaving his bun uneaten and the new PIDW update half-read, what he expects to find is an open roof, debris, dust, and a huge mess that insurance and probably his big brothers will have to deal with.

What he doesn't expect to find is a child shakily sitting up on the ground. Just behind him, high enough that the impossible crash must have been the boy falling, is a chasm as black as the abyss, dark coils crackling in the space. Shen Yuan barely contains his horror, a visceral sense of dread that gnaws at him like poison as he watches the hole closing, like an eye watching him sinisterly until it closes. The air smells of sulfur, ozone, and something else thick, like mortuary incense.

For a long moment, Shen Yuan stares into empty space almost sightlessly, trying to understand *what the hell is going on.*

Then, the boy finally sits up shakily. He's on his knees, his gaze lost and disoriented. His eyes are as dark as pitch black, with a firm gaze that's too hard for a boy his age. His hair is a thick, dark, and dense tangle, escaping from his high ponytail in unruly strands. Despite how wild his hair makes him look, there's a delicate beauty mark under his eye, and his sweet, pretty face is so delicate and tender that Shen Yuan imagines every Ayi in his building would be after him, trying to pinch those rounded, pretty cheeks.

In the center of his forehead, Shen Yuan stares in stupefied horror at a red zuiyin that he knows *very well.*

The boy looks at him. His gaze is unfocused, disoriented. He opens his mouth to say something.

Whatever he's about to say, the words die as all that comes out of his mouth is blood before the boy collapses, fainting like a rag doll on the floor. Nothing remains of the portal behind him.

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

Shen Yuan learns three things the next night: that caring about a child's health is much harder than pretending to care about one's own health, that he must send some large thank-you gift to his mother for the many sleepless nights watching over him at his bedside, and that the boy's name is Luo Chengle.

“Hey, hey, don’t move,” Shen Yuan orders for the umpteenth time, as the feverish, shivering boy tries to stand in the lukewarm, almost cold, tub of water. His skin is burning, his thermometer has gone crazy just being near the boy, and everything he’s saying is a delirious rambling. If Shen Yuan hadn’t seen the enormous gap shattering reality in his own living room, he probably wouldn’t believe half of what the boy is babbling. “If you stand up, you might fall. Everything is wet and slippery.”

He's discarded the boy's robes, setting them aside. He's allowed him to keep his pants, but even his boots and socks are left out, crumpled as Shen Yuan strained every fiber in his body to carry the boy so he could submerge him halfway into the tub of nearly cold water to try to bring his temperature down. He'd already ordered children's fever-reducing medicine from a nearby pharmacy (among… many other things to stock and supplement his personal medicine cabinet), and his delivery app said there were still twenty minutes left.

Good. Shen Yuan can handle that. It's not every day that he can get to take advantage of the perks of being a chronically ill person!

Step one: lower the fever.

“Don’t touch,” the boy stammers, pulling Shen Yuan away from his arms. “No, *no*. I’m cold. It hurts. Don’t touch.”

Shen Yuan feels a horrible sensation in his stomach. He forces himself to breathe deeply, wet up to his elbows, while using one of the plastic cups he uses to bathe when he needs to bathe sitting down on a bad day to continue splashing the child with cool water.

He should call a doctor. His fingers *itch* to call a doctor. Sadly, he doesn't believe that even with all his family's bribes and influence, he can call a doctor to treat an undocumented child, much less a child with sharp canines, a burning zuiyin on his forehead, and tiny nails that scrape against Shen Yuan's skin every time he tries to struggle against his touch.

“I know it hurts,” Shen Yuan breathes out. He’s terrified, trying to make sense of it. He knows he won’t be able to deal with any of this now or ever while the child is so feverish. “I’m so sorry. But you’ll feel better, okay? I’ll take care of you.”

The boy looks at him again, his eyes unfocused. They're dark, intense, profound. They're far too intelligent for such a small child, and nothing in their weak gaze makes Shen Yuan feel any more at ease.

“*Who* are you?” the boy protests. His mouth curls into a pout. There are tears in the corners of his red eyes.

“My name is Shen Yuan,” he says, and the boy’s pout trembles. It’s not as if his name can mean anything, but Shen Yuan still tries to keep his panic from seeping through. He forces a smile and pretends everything is okay. He’s perfect at it. “I’m not a doctor, but sometimes I get really sick too. I can take care of you, if you’ll let me. But I need you to work with me. Okay?”

The boy nods. Shen Yuan has untied his hair from the high ponytail, and it's now falling down, very long and thick. Shen Yuan sighs, thinking that he doesn't have any shampoo that can help him style those curls and that he'll have to make *another* run at the nearby pharmacy.

…or not. Or the Father, the Demon Emperor Luo-Fucking-Binghe will probably come looking for his son soon. Hopefully.

Shen Yuan is not going to think about that now.

He keeps splashing cool water over his forehead, letting it run down his head, behind his neck, down his back, feeling for swollen glands in his neck and armpits. He can't find any physical signs that this is some kind of normal or known illness; probably, the high fever combined with the spitting blood on his carpet implies something related to qi, but how the hell is Shen Yuan going to treat that?! There are no such things in the world he lives in!

The water barely reaches the boy's waist. Just because of that, when his doorbell rings, Shen Yuan runs to the door, his sleeves rolled up, soaked, water splashing everywhere, and scratches on his forearms that sting and he must take care of as soon as he gets the boy out of danger. The delivery man has him sign for it and leaves him a box with several emergency medical supplies: among them, Shen Yuan finds the famous and beloved fever syrup that his grandmother and later his mother used to give him.

It's not his safest bet either. No medicine sold in a pharmacy box can be *truly* traditional medicine. However, it has enough herbs to be at least helpful.

Luo Chengle hasn't moved. His expression remains almost blank, with his cheeks burning, his eyes vacant, and his breathing shallow. His lips are pale and trembling.

Shen Yuan pours the indicated amount into the box and holds the medicine to the boy's lips. Chengle squirms at the smell, screwing up his face, but when Shen Yuan begins to coo at him, trying to lull him with soft words to agree to drink it, promising that he'll feel better afterward (he hopes), the boy finally accepts. He drinks reluctantly and falls still again, shivering with fever, his body burning.

Shen Yuan sets aside his medical supplies and continues moistening the area with lukewarm water, which gradually grows colder. Chengle shows little reaction: sometimes, his face fills with terror, as if recognizing that he is not somewhere familiar. He tries to move, struggles a little with Shen Yuan, cries, and then collapses back down, trembling while Shen Yuan continues to wipe cool cloths over his skin. Sometimes, his eyes fill with curiosity, as if he is

reacting but rather than being frightened, is driven by a more curious than aggressive side, watching Shen Yuan's hands, his movements, his surroundings with excessive attention.

“Are you a criminal?” he asks at one point. Shen Yuan is startled. He speaks more quietly. “Mom says only criminals have hair like that.”

Shen Yuan grimaces.

“I'm not, I promise,” he says, forcing a small smile. “This place is… it's a long way from Chengle's house. Some of us here have short hair, and that's fine.”

“Oh,” the boy says. He blinks, his eyes lazy. He seems a little more awake and not so delirious. “That’s weird.”

Shen Yuan forces himself to keep smiling.

“Very weird,” he agrees. He takes Luo Chengle’s temperature again. There’s barely any change. “How is Chengle feeling?”

The boy frowns. He opens his mouth. Luckily, this time, there's no blood.

“How do you know my name?” he complains. Shen Yuan forces himself, above all, not to tremble and to keep smiling.

“You told me,” he notes, carefully pouring another cup of cool water on the boy’s head. He barely blinks as the water trickles down his face. “You said, ‘Don’t touch me! Stay away, you foolish servant! I am the Prince Luo Chengle, son of the Emperor, you cannot kidnap me!’”

“Oh,” the boy says. His little mouth opens into an “o,” which, on another occasion, would probably have been adorable. Shen Yuan supposes it makes sense that the little boy looks so confused. He’s not entirely sure what effect modern medicine might have on someone raised on natural herbal medicines. He seems slightly numb, but he’s no longer shivering, at least. “I was rude. I apologize.”

This time, Shen Yuan's smile doesn't feel so forced. He sighs.

“It’s okay,” he hums. He places his wet cloth over Chengle’s cheeks, red as two bright apples. It’s so endearingly adorable that Shen Yuan’s poor heart won’t come out unscathed. Oh, really, so small and sweet! “You were scared, and you’re very sick. It’s normal.”

“I don’t get sick,” the boy says. Or rather, he stammers. “Father Emperor has special blood. So do I. That’s why I don’t get sick.”

Shen Yuan supposes that's a way of putting it; of course, Luo Binghe's blood parasites wouldn't let him get sick, and his children, being born with them, would definitely have a biological safeguard. However, well. He doesn't think this level of sickness is... exactly biological.

“I think you have a qi deviation,” Shen Yuan says, sighing. On his forehead, the zuiyin is small, but it burns even more than his entire skin. Carefully, Shen Yuan presses a cold, wet

towel over the heat on his forehead, trying to keep his hands from shaking too much.

“Oh,” the boy frowns slightly. His eyes are still somewhat cloudy when he looks at Shen Yuan, even with those masses of long, dark eyelashes framing them. He looks like an overly cute porcelain doll, with an excess of rouge on his cheeks. “Father Emperor usually gets those.”

And, as abruptly as he says that, Luo Chengle starts to cry.

“There, there,” Shen Yuan pours another splash of cool water. He’s shivering, soaked, splashed all over, and at this rate he’ll probably end up getting sick, but what the hell. “It’ll be okay… Okay? You’ll… get better, eh, and your Father will come for you…”

“No!” and the boy howls as if Shen Yuan had hit him. Shen Yuan gasps as two small hands clamp down on his wrists, so tight he’s sure they’re going to bruise. Shit, shit, *shit.* “No, *no*! I don’t want him to come! I don’t!”

…Shen Yuan has no intelligent response. He swallows, taking a breath, trying to move his arms. Chengle holds him with an iron grip, his small, sharp nails digging into his skin. He's sure that if he moves too much, he'll have more than just scratches on his forearms to deal with.

“Shhh,” he whispers, shakily. He’s sure his heart is beating so loudly that even the agitated boy in front of him can hear it. “It’s okay. He’s not… He’s not going to scold you, okay? Something bad probably happened, but he won’t blame you for it, okay? He’ll take responsibility for who sent you here and come get you…”

Shen Yuan hadn't had much time to grapple with the whys and wherefores. Honestly, seeing Luo Chengle's altered state, his qi on the verge of deviate (or deviating? How the hell would he know? He has no idea how to even check!), it doesn't take long for him to realize that whatever brought the little Heavenly Demon to his apartment probably wasn't a rewarding experience for anyone involved.

For the same reason, when Luo Chengle opens his mouth and says:

“No!” he protests fiercely. “No one sent me here! I came alone!”

…Shen Yuan actually has to wrestle with his head a bit to fit the narrative of *what the hell happened then.*

“Alone?” he asks, his voice calm. Luo Chengle’s hands loosen slightly from his wrists, and Shen Yuan lets out a relieved sigh, dropping them to rinse the washcloth again and continue running the cool water all over the boy’s cute little face.

“Alone!” he insists. “I’m *always* alone! I’ll always *be* alone! Father Emperor doesn’t want me, and neither does Mother! Chengle is always alone and he’ll always be alone, and I didn’t want to be there anymore! So I used Father Emperor’s ugly portal-opening sword to take me to a better place!”

“You used *Xin Mo*?” Shen Yuan gasps, absolutely convinced he now understands the reason why that little savage is having this deviation in his qi. He presses the washcloth more carefully against his forehead, then against his throat, behind his ears. The boy is still squirming, as if in pain, but not as much now.

“That’s it!” he protests, screwing up his face. Fat, sad tears stream down his face. “Father Emperor will never find me! He won’t come for me, I don’t want to, I don’t want to!”

Shen Yuan feels a stifled sense of dread. All he can do is allow a hysterical laugh to burst from his throat. Oh, fuck, of course if this child had gotten there, Luo Binghe would find *a way* to get to him. God, he hoped it would be sooner rather than later, when he'd lost his patience.

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath. Then another. Then *another*. For a moment, he's afraid he'll have to reach for his inhaler, because he feels like the air isn't really circulating into his lungs. He concentrates on breathing deeply, calming the diffuse, chaotic, maddening hysteria before it overwhelms him.

“We’ll talk about this later, okay?” he says. The boy lets out a whimper, a “hmph” so stubborn that Shen Yuan can almost imagine him folding his arms and grumbling. For now, he looks too weak.

It takes a little over another hour for his temperature to drop enough for Shen Yuan to see fit to pull him out of the water. Chengle can barely stand, but Shen Yuan drags his wheelchair over and asks him to sit in it while he gets some clothes. Of course, whatever he has will be pretty big on him, but not huge! It's just like Shen Yuan is just a skinny, sickly thing!

He comes back with a pair of soft pajamas. Then, he wraps one of his larger towels around Chengle's hair, deciding that this will be a job for future Shen Yuan, and gently helps Chengle out of his pants while facing away from him to give him some privacy while he helps him stand up for it.

At all times, Chengle clings to him so tightly that Shen Yuan could cry. His grip is hard, but shaky. Chengle clings to Shen Yuan as if he's afraid of falling, or even worse, as if he's afraid that Shen Yuan will drop him.

The pajamas don't fit *too* badly. They're quite big, but the elastic on the pants doesn't slip too far. Shen Yuan adds a hairdryer with a styling spray and all those other things to his mental shopping list of things *he'll need* to buy while he carries Chengle in his arms, ready to carry him to his bed to lay him down while he orders some hot soup for the boy. He's sure there must be a 24-hour store where he can order some warm traditional chicken soup (or at least the store-bought version with the damn microplastics and powdered preservatives).

Maybe taking him to his room is a mistake.

“What is *this*?!” Luo Chengle’s face is horrified as he looks around Shen Yuan’s room. Even in the dim lighting of his desk lantern and the salt lamp on his nightstand, a strange gift from his mother, Shen Yuan is certain that with the child’s keen eyesight, everything in the room is

visible. And yet, Shen Yuan squirms as he notices that at least more than half, if not all, of the posters, action figures, and fanmerch of every kind is from PIDW.

Well, more than that, from *Luo Binghe*.

“I’ll take them off if they bother you,” he offers. The boy tries to wriggle in his arms, almost causing them both to fall if Shen Yuan hadn’t managed to free him from his bed, tripping over his own feet.

“Burn them!” he protests, horrified. His expression is sharp, which doesn’t seem to help the red in his cheeks. “They’re *ugly*! It’s ugly! Everything is ugly! Are you a criminal priest? Is this a temple? Why did Xin Mo bring me here? I don’t like it here anymore.”

“Shhh,” Shen Yuan hops on one leg, feeling his ankle slightly sore from the fall. Damn. It really is bruising all over. “This… Now, you’re weak, okay? We don’t want your qi deviating again. I’ll explain later, okay?”

The boy wrinkles his nose.

“You won’t,” he decides, and looks away. He stares at one of Luo Binghe’s posters, his expression so hideous it seems he could burn it with his eyes. “Adults think I’m *stupid*. They say later, later, *later*. It’s never later! Later never comes!”

In the darkness, the bright red zuiyin seems to shine brighter. Large tears are welling up in the boy's eyes as he clenches his fists too tightly. Shen Yuan sighs, taking a seat beside him and reaching out to wipe away one of the tears falling down his sweet little face.

“I promise,” Shen Yuan says, as vehemently as he can. “I’ll swear it on whatever you want most. Now, I need you to calm down. Please? I don’t want you have a qi deviation again.”

The boy looks back at him, hesitant. It's clear there's something about Chengle that would make a social worker have a few words—Shen Yuan isn't entirely sure he understands what, but everything about him seems… fragile. He's not thin or battered, but something about the impulsiveness and ferocity of his actions, his brusqueness, his lack of care for the things (and people) around him…

Shen Yuan sighs in relief as Chengle nods.

“Just take all of them off,” the boy demands, his expression dismayed. “He’s everywhere. He’s staring at me, and I don’t like it.”

Shen Yuan snorts a laugh. He gently pats the towel-wrapped head, struggling to stand. Yes, his muscles definitely didn't benefit from bending over for so long to help Chengle. And certainly didn't do any good to carry him twice. He's not sure if his ankle is sprained, but he's definitely twisted it.

Still, he tries not to limp as he walks up to the walls. There are certainly posters a child shouldn't see: Luo Binghe splattered with blood, or those robes too open revealing a sculpted

chest—what? That was good fan art! Limited edition! He would have been an idiot not to buy it!

He carefully removes the larger posters and sets them aside. He'll take care to peel off the tape and roll them up very carefully later. He does the same with the medium and smaller ones later. His walls look silly and empty, but he leaves the ones that aren't about PIDW or Binghe: there are some Ghibli posters his brother gave him at some point when they moved, a vain memory of his Totoro-obsessed childhood, and some video game posters.

With a sigh, he also puts the action figures aside. He stores them in a drawer inside his closet, and does the same with the pile of posters.

When he turns around, Luo Chengle is staring at him. He hasn't stopped staring.

Shen Yuan feels a strange chill down his spine.

“Better?” he asks. The boy makes a strange face and nods. Shen Yuan forces a smile. “Okay, then. Are you hungry? I can order something to eat.”

The boy grimaces again, his lips puckering. Shen Yuan moves closer, touching his forehead to check his temperature—and yes, Chengle must be better, because he scrunches up his face and squirms, pulling away from his touch. Ah, at least he has answers now. That, even if it means dealing with a wilder child, is far better for Shen Yuan than having to see him with that vacant expression. He had really scared him!

“No,” Chengle says, his stomach growling at the same time. His face flushes as he crosses his arms, looking away from Shen Yuan with a determined expression. “I’m not hungry!”

Shen Yuan bites the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

“Okay,” he hums, shrugging. “Well, I am hungry,” and glances down at his half-eaten bun, sadly abandoned. Oh, it was probably cold by now. Nothing a microwave wouldn’t fix, of course, but… “I’ll order some food. A very rich chicken soup.”

The boy looks at him. He has the exact look of a devil doll, and instead of frightening him, Shen Yuan finds him quite adorable.

“With noodles?” Chengle asks. Shen Yuan hums.

“Sounds good with noodles,” he says, smiling. Chicken noodles it is, then. Not that Shen Yuan has any idea how to deal with wild children, but his little sister had certainly been a picky eater at times during their childhood, so at least Shen Yuan *knew* how to deal with that. “Mmm, what else could I ask for dessert? What dessert does Chengle recommend?”

Chengle hesitates a little. He seems reluctant to say outright that he wants something, but Shen Yuan supposes he can disguise it by asking for his opinion. Which, even if he doesn't know much about children, he thinks is a good path to take.

“The sticky rice balls are delicious,” Chengle admits. Shen Yuan nods, searching for his phone from where he left it. He grimaces at the thought of charging it as soon as possible, but

he can get by with that. It's not *that* late either. "It's soup. But sweet."

"Sweet soup," Shen Yuan hums, checking his delivery app. He finds an open restaurant that can make some deliveries in less than half an hour, and breathes a sigh of relief when he finds both dishes on their menu. Really, isn't this the effect of a little bit of a mini-protagonist halo? "Fine, I'll order that. It won't be long. Does Chengle want some crackers in the meantime? Or any snacks?"

Shen Yuan is sure everything in his pantry is overly chemically laden. He's not entirely sure how healthy any of it is for a kid raised on food without hormones or pesticides… or additives or MSG. Damn, he hopes it doesn't actually upset his stomach.

"I don't want to disturb the cooks," Chengle says. Shen Yuan looks up from his phone only to see the boy draw his knees up to his chin, hugging them and staying there, a little ball of boy with a huge pale green towel as a turban. The small zuiyin on his forehead stands out starkly against the color scheme Shen Yuan has set for him, matched only by the rosy hue of his cheeks. "It's fine. I'll wait for dinner."

Shen Yuan frowns.

"If Chengle is very hungry, he has to eat," he says, and realizes with a grimace that he sounds just like his brother. Uh, well, his Er-ge was part of his upbringing when his parents worked too hard to support the family with all the financial hardships Shen Yuan's poor health caused. Of course he'll sound just like him when he makes those comments.

Luo Chengle doesn't seem to like it. He wrinkles his face and looks away again.

"No!" he says, determined. "I don't want to. I don't want to be a bother. If I bother, I'll be a burden. Nobody wants a burden."

"Hey," Shen Yuan stomps his feet as hard as he can until he sits down next to the boy. He doesn't look back, and Shen Yuan sighs. "Chengle, look. You're *not* a burden. You're a child, and you need to be taken care of. Okay?"

"I'm not a *child*," Luo Chengle protests, pouting in a way that's clearly very childish. "I'm a young heavenly demon. I'm an Imperial Prince. I'm Second Wife Liu's son! You don't have to take care of me. I don't have to be a burden."

Shen Yuan gulps and chokes on his revelations before making some ridiculous comment (Is this what Liu Mingyan looks like under the mask?! Damn, damn, *damn*!). He only reaches out to gently rub the boy's back. His back is firm, and there's no squishy baby fat. He's skinny and lanky, not in an unhealthy way, but in a way that feels... odd.

It shouldn't be this way.

"Well, do you know you used that sword of your father's?" he asks. Luo Chengle nods, pouting again. "That sword, Xin Mo, is very, very powerful, and *very* dangerous. But the important thing here is: it brought you here. And you want me to tell you a secret?"

Like any curious child, Luo Chengle glances in his direction when the word "secret" is on the table. Shen Yuan is relieved by the small, curious glint in his eyes.

“We’re not in any of your father’s realm, neither his kingdom nor dominions,” he says, though every word sounds ridiculous in his mouth for him. Luo Chengle’s eyebrows rise in surprise. “Here, you’re no imperial prince. You’re just Chengle. So, you can be a child with me. If you’re hungry, you tell me, and I’ll get you food. If you want something, you tell me, and I’ll see how to get it. Is that okay with you?”

Luo Chengle looks at him as if Shen Yuan is telling him the stupidest thing in the world. However, his lower lip trembles, and the boy nods. He hugs his knees even tighter again.

As if unconsciously, he shudders.

“Are you cold?” he asks. Luo Chengle shakes his head. Then he nods. Shen Yuan sighs, hobbling a little to find an extra blanket in his closet. He almost knocks his winter blankets over himself trying to pull it down, but it’s worth it: it’s one of the softest and fluffiest he owns, and, as his Meimei puts it, *‘it’s like being hugged by a cloud.’*

Shen Yuan carries his offering to Luo Chengle, placing it on his shoulders and wrapping him up tightly. Luo Chengle takes a moment to reach out his little hands and pull the blanket over his shoulders. Shen Yuan feels his own mouth curl into an involuntary smile as the boy, indeed, seems wrapped in a cloud. He takes advantage of the moment while he picks up his phone to complete his order (adding a few other things, just in case Chengle craves something else to try or eat), and when he receives the notification that his purchase has been completed, he opens the camera and silently takes a photo of Chengle.

When he looks at him, the little boy with the towel turban, wrapped in clouds, dimly lit and immortalized in that photograph, he actually feels something strange against his chest. Luo Chengle… doesn't look like a happy child.

Well, what kind of happy child runs away from home using a cursed sword to open a fucking portal to another world?

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath, tries to control any treacherous emotions that might escape him, and moves forward with a decision. First things first: he picks up his charger and plugs in his phone. Then, he searches through his clothes for something to change into.

“I’ll go take a quick shower,” he says. He’s already caught too much cold, and it will be a huge miracle if he doesn’t get sick from this. Hell, if he had to call a nurse, how the hell would he explain to her about the child? Luo Chengle barely raises his eyes, looking at him. “I’ll leave the door ajar, okay? Anything you need, I’m just a shout away. I won’t be long.”

Luo Chengle nods. He wraps the blanket tighter around himself. Shen Yuan hums to himself, hoping (praying) that he won't decide to do something wild and crazy and stay there, in the center of his bed, waiting. As he passes, he sighs and takes and discards the bun that was meant to be his dinner. Ah, what a waste! He's sure he won't be able to reheat it without it being soggy and dry.

Shen Yuan takes an exaggeratedly quick shower. He stays under the hot water only long enough to warm up, carefully soaping the wounds Chengle's nails made on his arms. He spends longer applying the hydrogen peroxide and creams from his first-aid kit than he does bathing or changing.

When he comes out, his heart in his throat (his Er-ge used to say, “A silent child is a child who’s gotten into trouble, but you can’t find him yet”), he discovers with utter relief that Chengle has simply let himself be rocked in the blanket, his hair finally sprouting from the turban in a fluffy mess. His eyes are closed, and his chest is rising and falling rhythmically; for the first time, there are no zuiyin shining on his forehead. His tiny fingers don’t have sharp claws, and Shen Yuan can breathe a sigh of relief.

Good. *Good.* Caring for half (half? quarter?) Heavenly Demon child who looked human seemed better than caring for one who still had visibly identifiably demonic features.

Shen Yuan tries to distract himself. He throws Luo Chengle's blood-spattered robes into a bucket, where he pours his blood-eliminating cocktail, the result of many nosebleeds from irritation when his lungs were a mess before he found the right combination of corticosteroids and had to use oxygen cannulas: hydrogen peroxide and the baking soda and vinegar paste.

Then, he dries the bathroom with his own clothes as best he can, mostly to prevent his future self from taking a nasty fall from stepping on a wet tile, and throws his own used clothes and towels into the washing machine. He takes advantage of the opportunity to throw in the rest of his dirty clothes, while he's at it. He reorganizes his medicine cabinet. He puts bandages over the slightly less superficial wounds left by Chengle's nails on his wrists. He bandages his slightly swollen ankle firmly and covers the bandage with an ankle brace to maintain firm footing.

He cleans his desk. He arranges and puts away the Luo Binghe posters. He does the same with the figurines and much of the other hanging merch, like chibi keychains and even a very poor, he supposes, 3D-printed replica of Xin Mo that he was planning to hang but never found the right place for. He opens the window just a crack, allowing just enough fresh air to filter in, locking it so it can't open any further. He won't leave it open that long. Just enough to... air out.

When he sits down in the desk chair he abandoned when he heard the crash earlier in the night, his whole body aches as if he'd been beaten particularly brutally. He swallows painkillers without water and sinks into a trance of avoiding thinking by any means possible until the bell rings with dinner.

The delivery man is friendly: he seems concerned about the visible bandage on his ankle and helps him with the boxes of food – in fact, Shen Yuan is sure he overreacted looking at everything now, but hey! He can never have too much good food, and he has a good refrigerator and a very good microwave! Shen Yuan thanks him with a significant tip before the delivery man leaves.

Shen Yuan unpacks the food. The soups smell like Grandma's soup, and they're hot enough to not need a microwave. Still, he switches them from their disposable plastic containers (microplastics! Too many microplastics for a kid!!) to the few soup bowls he has. He also

gets a spoon and chopsticks. He tastes it only to notice that it does, in fact, taste homemade and not like something made from a packet.

He's not quite sure how a little Heavenly Demon might react to such early exposure to high doses of MSG. And sugars. Hell. He's going to have to buy a lot of organic fruits and vegetables. And probably hire a kitchen Ayi to cook for him and bring everything in glass containers to stock his pantry and refrigerator. Oh, his Er-ge and Da-ge will be *excessively* happy if they don't get close to the context of the reason behind his decisions.

Shen Yuan puts the plates on the table. He also adds some of the rice he ordered . He's not entirely sure the child likes vegetables (what child does, anyway?) but just in case, he leaves another small plate aside. Just a little. To see his reaction.

When he's finished with that, he realizes this is the first time he's actually setting a table. It's a bit embarrassing, when he really thinks about it: Shen Yuan is twenty-five, and although he's lived an exaggeratedly long life by the standards of his illness, he's never been the kind of person to... do these things. Why take up the table, dishes? He'd have to wash everything later! And the cleaner Ayi only came once a week, twice in the winter when Shen Yuan was more of a worm in a blanket cocoon than a human being!

When would he have done it if it weren't for someone else, anyway?

Shen Yuan sighs. He ignores the chaotic downward spiral of his own thoughts and goes to wake Luo Chengle.

Luo Chengle is an adorable little boy sleeping. Even more adorable than he is awake, in fact: there's not a sneer or a fierce expression on his face. The sweet little mole under his eye is a sight to behold, and his little mouth is half-open. His chest rises and falls rhythmically, and he sleeps so peacefully that Shen Yuan is very, very sorry to have to wake him.

Still, he bites the bullet and does it.

“Chengle,” he whispers. “Wake up. Dinner’s ready.”

He only shakes the boy twice before he opens his eyes in wide-eyed surprise. Shen Yuan barely has time to register what's happening before the boy pushes him away, sitting up in bed with a fiercely alarmed expression as Shen Yuan falls awkwardly onto the floor. He grimaces. Ah, he really won't make it through this in one piece. He's too strong a boy!!

Luo Chengle doesn't say anything for a moment. He scans the room with shocked eyes. His hair is an absolute mess, and Shen Yuan internally cries about how much his algorithm will be screwed while he tries to figure out how to properly care for it. In the meantime, tying it in a high bun should do the trick.

“It wasn’t a dream,” Chengle says, almost to himself, and then seems to notice Shen Yuan on the ground. “Aren’t you going to get up?”

Shen Yuan tries his best to stand without wincing. He stumbles a little, but reaches out to Luo Chengle. His little feet are bare, and they twitch when they hit the cold floor, making him hop

twice or three times before he gets used to the chill. Still, Shen Yuan walks past his closet and pulls out a small pair of socks. When Chengle is sitting in the chair across from the table—still disheveled, still wrapped in the cloud blanket—Shen Yuan bends down, his whole body shrieking in agony as he puts warm socks on Chengle's feet.

The child looks at the food with wide, amazed eyes.

“I hope you like it,” Shen Yuan hums, finally settling into his chair. Everything squeaks and hurts. He’s sure taking another pill won’t do him any good, but damn, he*’s going* to need it. “In this place, and in Chengle’s home, the meals tend to be different. I hope they taste good to you.”

Chengle's gaze isn't suspicious, but rather curious. He takes the spoon with curiosity, scooping a little bit of broth into it. When he tastes it, his eyes widen in astonishment. He scoops another spoonful and rushes it to his mouth, and on the third, the broth trickles down his chin.

Shen Yuan finds himself smiling before he realizes it. Ah, his phone, his phone! He doesn't have the strength to get up and look for it. Still, he hopes he can remember that expression: genuine wonder, a bright face. It makes Shen Yuan feel the same fascinated thrill he felt when his Meimei took her first steps toward him, or when she earned her high school diploma a year earlier.

“It’s delicious!” says Chengle, completely surprised.

He slurps the noodles, and the broth splatters in all directions. Shen Yuan can't help but smile and let him eat. He eats his own food, his stomach grateful. With a sigh, he supposes he should eat something better too. Don't kids follow suit or something? He has no idea how long Chengle will stay, but in the meantime...

Shen Yuan almost dropped his spoon when he was suddenly struck by the stark reality: not only did he have no idea how long Luo Chengle was going to be staying there, but he also had no idea *how* Luo Binghe was going to find him. Of course, if anyone could find Luo Chengle across a whole universe, it would be his father, Luo Binghe. However, how the hell would he find him? Did he even know that a whole other world existed, far away? How the hell had Xin Mo managed to tear open a portal *so strong* that it could open through a different universe?

Shen Yuan supposes that if it had been someone else, he'd have a lot more trouble dealing with or believing all of this. But he's seen the portal with his own eyes. He calmed Chengle's qi deviation somewhat, and honestly, if he'd had any doubts, Chengle's immediate reaction upon entering his room...

Ah. Shen Yuan rubs his temples, feeling the sour taste of a growing migraine in his mouth. He can deal with this. He just has to wait, a couple of days? Take care of Chengle as best he can during that time? Despite his sulking, Chengle doesn't seem like a difficult child to take care of. Shen Yuan is certain that while he won't make it easy, *he can do it.*

It'll only be a few days. No more than that, Shen Yuan is absolutely sure. Luo Binghe will come to pick up his son like a father picking up his child from kindergarten a little late because he was busy with work, and everything will be fine.

Everything will be fine.

Chapter End Notes

SY: Ah, what a great time to read the latest Airplane update and eat this bun I found at the back of my fridge! It's not like I'm going to die from it or anything
SY!SQQ in his own world: *sneezes*

This is how you avoid a death and subsequent transmigration Bingge, not by kidnapping it in a traumatic way, learn from your son

HAHAHA Ah, well, I hope you liked the chapter!! If you're coming from Tumblr, you already know how long it takes Bingge to find his son and Shen Yuan because lol this came from a post where I was throwing out plot bunnies like an fool with a keyboard and I got obsessed. BUT if you're not coming from Tumblr, would you like to play a guessing game? How long do you think it will take Bingge to find his son? :3 hehehehehe
Little Luo Chengle, a mix of Binghe's and Liu Mingyan's (and of course, Liu Qingge's) pretty features, with his uncle's fierce stubbornness. F in the chat for the original Liu Qingge, he'd be proud of that little rascal

Thanks so much for reading!! :3 I hope you enjoyed the chapter. Don't forget to leave your kudos and comments, they make me so, so happy!! See you soon! :D

Chapter 2: First days, first week

Chapter Notes

> HEY GUYS? THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR THE HUGE RECEPTION I can't say it enough, but I have to thank EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU for the enormous love you give to my fanfics. Thanks for so much :D
>
> There are no warnings for this chapter :)
>
> Enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luo Binghe doesn't come looking for Luo Chengle for the next two, or even three, days, as Shen Yuan had assumed would happen. In fact, those first few days pass without any portals between worlds opening again: Shen Yuan stares fixedly at any empty space in his room, waiting, thinking, praying inwardly.

Nothing happens. Luo Binghe does not appear.

Luo Chengle doesn't seem surprised by this.

“Father Emperor doesn’t like me,” Chengle had said the next morning over congee, which Shen Yuan had just unpacked and served in actual bowls. Chengle spoke in an utterly dispassionate tone of voice. It was sad to hear. He didn’t speak as if this fact were something horrible he had to live with, but rather plain resignation. “He never sees me. He’s always busy with all those wives who are rude and mean to me and scold me when I do something good that their own children can’t. Father Emperor only cooks for me on my birthdays. He doesn’t even cook my favorite food when he does.”

Shen Yuan sighs. He pats Chengle's head in a comforting way whenever he shares something sad, and frankly, he evades the nauseating feeling of suffocation whenever he not only hears, but sees the remnants of carelessness in Luo Chengle.

It’s true that he’s a healthy boy: he’s not sickly thin, he has a regular sleep schedule even if he has some nightmares, and he has quite a bit of hyperactivity to burn off even as he recovers from the horrendous qi deviation Xin Mo’s misuse had led him to. It’s also true that he’s clearly… an unhappy boy. He seems to want to take up as little space as possible, even despite his boasts of being a Prince. He demands things, but not in the way a child would demand them, but like someone who’s used to others anticipating his wishes and giving him specific things to do, and without that, he doesn’t quite know what to do.

On the second day (or, technically, the first) Chengle starts with the questions.

“What is that spiritual artifact?” he asks, slipping under Shen Yuan’s arm to see the screen where Shen Yuan is sorting through children’s-sized clothing, various shoes that should be roughly his size if he’s measured the boots the kid arrived in correctly, and more completely necessary things (like hair products for curls, a hairdryer with a diffuser, hair ties, and a few other things he’s sure will be less than practical for him).

Shen Yuan sighs.

“It’s not a spiritual artifact,” he explains patiently. “In this world, there are no spiritual artifacts or things like that. Everything runs on electricity and the internet. Electricity is powerful, but dangerous, and you shouldn’t go near it,” he warns. Luo Chengle looks at him, nodding his head seriously, as if Shen Yuan were warning him of some kind of dangerous monster. “And the internet is like… You know those spiritual communication arrays?”

“To talk to people far away?” Chengle asks, tilting his head like a puppy. Shen Yuan nods. “Yes! Mother has one with her family. To know that everything is good in her home.”

“Well,” he nods, carefully guarding the information about Liu Mingyan. He’s still processing it. “The internet works a bit like that. It’s like a huge communication system where there are little… spaces where people can do all sorts of things. Like what I’m doing now: shopping.”

“Aren’t there markets?” the boy asks, astonished. “Aren’t there festivals at night markets? That’s boring.”

Shen Yuan laughs just a little.

“There are some markets, but they’re different from the ones in your world,” he explains. Chengle nods, as if that makes much more sense. Shen Yuan points to the clothes he’s buying. “Now, I’m buying you some clothes. They’re clothes from my world, so they have a lot fewer layers than all your robes, but they’ll help you blend in when we go out sometime.”

“Oh,” Chengle nods, his still-unruly curls bouncing wildly. Then he leans even further over the small screen, almost climbing onto Shen Yuan’s lap to watch. “Can I see?”

“You can choose with me,” he offers. Chengle gives him a surprised look at that. Shen Yuan wonders when the boy last chose something to wear, after all. He must have servants who prepared his clothes before he wore them daily from the ones he had at his disposal. “After all, it will be for you.”

They spend the next hour choosing things. Chengle is amazed at all the different types of children's clothing available. Almost all of the clothes he chooses are loose-fitting, long clothes in many light colors: light blues, greens. He also chooses things in pale lilac and pinks. Shen Yuan bites the inside of his cheek to keep from saying the automatic ‘pink is a girl's color’ to him, because, well, the model on the page is a boy! Not that Chengle needs to hear the kind of comments Shen Yuan grew up hearing anyway! It's just a stupid color.

The final order is *quite* expensive. Shen Yuan doesn't mind too much. He's never spent much, and as long as his family doesn't check exactly what he spent it on, he'll probably be able to

pass it off as a limited-edition action figure. Not that they ever minded such a big expense anyway.

Shen Yuan isn't entirely sure he wants Chengle to become an iPad kid, so he keeps him fairly away from screens. Still, he only has so many things to entertain a child who follows him around like a wayward duckling, so he sighs and pulls out his childhood collection of dinosaur books.

“There are no monsters in this world,” he explains, as Chengle opens it and gasps at the colorful pages, squinting at the written words. He’s not entirely sure that Chengle can understand everything, but… well. Shen Yuan didn’t have those books to read either, but to admire when he was little. “However, long, long ago, these creatures lived. Now, none exist, so there’s no danger. Still, perhaps it will… entertain you.”

It *definitely* entertains Chengle. For the next two hours, the boy rolls face down on one of the living room's plush rugs, shifting his attention from dinosaur to dinosaur, from book to book. His eyes are wide open, his mouth ajar in amazement.

Shen Yuan collapses in a corner for at least a quarter of an hour before start to do things.

First: hire a kitchen Ayi. It's not that difficult: he explains that he's taking care of a nephew—the son of a friend of his mother's who used to live in the countryside, but who has fallen ill now, so they have no one to leave the little boy with someone trustworthy to take care of him in the meantime. His parents work all the time, so Shen Yuan offered to help. The Ayi happily responds; they agree on a shopping budget, and she decides she'll come and cook twice a week to keep the refrigerator stocked with nutritious meals and healthy snacks.

Then: open a forum post with a new account just created for the freaking crazy situation and start *asking*.

“I have a child (age 6) in my care temporarily while his parents resolve a situation and are unable to intervene or assist me. This is the first time I’ve cared for a child—although not the first time I’ve dealt with children, it is the first time I’ve had full responsibility for one. What do you recommend I do?”

The answers are *varied*. Almost all of the helpful ones focus on the importance of a stable and consistent routine, maintaining schedules, explaining things, maintaining healthy conversations, and patiently asserting authority. If he doesn’t want the child to touch something, keep it out of reach. Keep healthy snacks available because a child of that age is hungry all the time. Make house rules clear, especially being consistent between the rules he states and the things he does—for example, if he says no more screens after a certain time, follow through like an adult so the child follows his example. Plan time for his own rest because a cranky adult is just a child throwing a tantrum because they know something's different but can't quite put their finger on it.

Shen Yuan takes mental notes, buys coloring books, crayons, and some harmless-looking stuffed animals. He also buys some spiral notebooks with blank paper so Chengle can draw and, why not, elementary-level activity books. It wouldn't hurt if he didn't neglect his education.

For the first two days, neither of them goes out – which seems to make Chengle anxious and nervous, overly hyperactive, bouncing in his seat or on the sofa all the time, with restless legs that don't seem to enjoy being within the same walls for so long – but Shen Yuan takes all their shopping and puts on the first Ghibli films which, and when he explains to Chengle are like an advanced form of theatre and none of it is real, the boy enjoys it with a huge face of amazement and when the film is over, he bombards Shen Yuan with a *lot* of questions.

Then, his sketchbooks fill with Totoro and Susuwatari. Shen Yuan adds a Totoro plush toy to his shopping cart for Chengle to cuddle at bedtime. They share a bed for now, because Shen Yuan doesn't think sleeping on the couch is good for his back, and Chengle hasn't complained once.

On the third day, when Chengle already boasts a neatly defined hair tied in a high ponytail full of fluffy curls, they have already finished all the takeout and Shen Yuan has thrown out all the expired food from his cupboard, they receive first everything that their new employee has ordered and almost fifteen minutes later, the kitchen-Ayi.

"Hello, sweetheart!" she says, bending down slightly to greet Chengle. The woman is probably his older brother's age, with a friendly smile and neatly tied hair. "You must be Chengle."

Luo Chengle doesn't seem at all enthusiastic about having guests. He's practically hiding behind Shen Yuan's leg, literally clinging to his thighs in a downright worrying manner. Shen Yuan sighs, patting his fluffy little head.

"He's shy," Shen Yuan says, though Chengle hadn't acted shy at all. He supposes it must be strange to have surprise guests after several days. Maybe he should have warned him, although Chengle knew someone would come to cook anyway. "Thank you so much for coming. I'm really bad at cooking, and I'm afraid if we had to rely on just me, we'd both starve to death."

Luo Chengle grips his leg even tighter. Shen Yuan suppresses a grimace of pain.

"It's okay, don't worry," the woman gives him a warm smile. "I'll take care of everything. You both have fun in the meantime."

Shen Yuan almost has to carry Luo Chengle on his leg until they leave the kitchen. The boy looks grimly, and it's not even halfway through Kiki's Delivery Service that he comes out of his sulking shell as he hugs his knees, frowning. Shen Yuan is starting to get nervous about what to do when Chengle, frowning and complaining, abruptly asks him:

"Is she your wife?"

Shen Yuan looks at him in bewilderment. Then, unable to contain his laughter, he shakes his head.

"No, no!" he says, and the boy raises his eyebrows. He seems very surprised. "I don't have a wife. Ayi is just someone I hired to cook for us. That way we have plenty of food available without asking for it."

“Oh,” Chengle said, looking surprised, very surprised. “Yuan-ge doesn’t have a wife? No one?”

At some point, Shen Yuan has no idea when, he had become Yuan-ge. Shen Yuan supposes that is better than ‘servant’, but anyway, he doesn't complain.

“Nope,” he hums, grinning. “No wife for me. This poor Yuan-ge is single and lonely. My only company these days has been you.”

Surprisingly, as always, Chengle smiles. His eyes sparkle.

“Good,” he says, and sounds satisfied with that.

They continue watching the movie, and Luo Chengle looks in a much better mood now, genuinely enjoying the movie they're both watching while eating some of those tasteless roasted seeds mix – weird and boring in Shen Yuan's opinion, but he also didn't want to give Chengle buttered popcorn or too many additives.

Luo Chengle remains in a good mood, and when Ayi leaves, he even thanks her for cooking. Shen Yuan does the same, adding a tip, and she leaves, promising to return midweek the following week, asking to be notified which of the recipes they liked so she can try them again.

When the three days Shen Yuan had hoped would take Luo Binghe to pick up his son finally come to an end, he decides he can't keep him locked up waiting for his father forever. If Luo Binghe will show up at his apartment, let him wait! He's been waiting without moving for too long for one restless child already!

“Today we'll go to the park,” he announces after breakfast. It's a good day: his muscles aren't screaming with dissatisfaction with every step he takes, although he's learned that doesn't mean he shouldn't carry his cane just in case. “Do you fancy a picnic and a run in the fresh air?”

He has to explain to Chengle a rough idea of what a picnic is, with illustrative photos. Still, Chengle is excited about it. He helps him make sandwiches with excited jumps, changes clothes three times, adds another sweater when Shen Yuan insists it will be cool outside, and already has his sneakers on when Shen Yuan is just putting on his face mask.

“Yuan-ge wears one too?” Chengle asks curiously. “Mother wears one. Something like that. It’s a veil! Everyone says she’s so pretty it distracts people. Chengle didn’t know Yuan-ge does too.”

Shen Yuan, despite everything, laughs.

“It’s not because I’m pretty,” he explains. His face is completely normal, not like Liu Mingyan’s peerless beauty or anything like that. “It’s because I have a lot of illnesses. Going out is difficult for me.”

“Ohh,” Chengle frowned, his expression complicated. “And Yuan-ge can’t be cured?”

“Nope,” Shen Yuan patted the boy’s head. “But it’s okay. As long as I avoid catching anything, or as long as I stick to my medication, everything will be fine. You don’t have to worry.”

The boy still seems worried. His concern doesn't last long once he's loaded the lunchbox with their lunches and the thermos of soup. Shen Yuan made sure to show him several photos of the city and, above all, explained how careful they should be on the streets, especially not crossing without holding his hand, being careful of cars, people in a hurry...

Still, when they are outside his building, Shen Yuan armed with his sweater, backpack with all the necessary supplies for any circumstance and walking stick in hand, Luo Chengle watches everything with a amazed and astonished expression.

They don't live too far from the largest park in their city, a place that Shen Yuan not only barely knows by sight, but doesn't even tend to think is close.

Shen Yuan already feels his body protesting for the walk when they arrive, so he peacefully makes his way to a seat where he claims his lunchbox and allows his back to relax against the bench. There aren't too many wooden games, nor too many children, but he's sure Chengle will quickly grasp how he might play.

“You can run and play, but please stay within my line of sight,” he says. Luo Chengle barely nods. Too hyperactive, he runs through bushes, looking at flowers, squealing when a bird flies overhead, squinting seeing another oldest boy climb a tree. Shen Yuan takes a few blurry photos and a short video of the boy suspiciously eyeing a slide before climbing and dropping down. And then repeat it over and over again in a laughter loop.

Luo Chengle is thoroughly amused. Shen Yuan watches everything he does: at first, he doesn't even go near other children. Then, a boy kicks his ball near him, and Chengle watches it suspiciously before gently kicking it back to the boy. The next thing Shen Yuan realizes is that the two children are kicking the ball further and further away and running after it. It seems that whoever catches it first wins, and he is surprised to see Chengle stumble sometimes, probably not as used to running in shoes like his. This probably gives his new friend an advantage, as he wins at least a third of the time.

Eventually, other children join in, and they end up chasing and catching each other, abandoning the ball with their tag you’re it game. Chengle’s laughter makes Shen Yuan smile as he takes photos.

With his phone in hand, he's surprised to notice he has *many* email notifications. Many people are tagging him on the PIDW forums—why the hell...?

'lol @PeerlessCucumber has already left PIDW, the ending was so bad that even he couldn't stand it.'

…Ending? What do fucking mean *ending*? The last update he'd missed reading when Chengle spawned on his apartment couldn't possibly be the final chapter, right? There were still so many plot holes left to be revealed! So many revenge arcs left to be completed! How was that jerk Airplane supposed to make an end *now*?

He scans the comments, ignoring spoilers as much as his sanity allows. What the *fuck*? Everyone agreed that the ending was deserved, a dark and vile revenge, but *what about Binghe*? What had happened to him? Had he gotten something more than just a harem and absolute power after all those arcs of dark poison and revenge?

Had the Protagonist gotten his happy ending?

Shen Yuan, given the number of posts tagging him to respond to analyses of the few active members with more neurons than blood in their penises, notes that *no.* That Airplane idiot, the very wretched man, did something horrible with the stupid ending of an even stupider author.

He sighs, closes the forums, and focuses on reality. In reality, that means there's a Luo Chengle, a son of the *damned Protagonist,* happily running around the park. Shen Yuan feels slightly dizzy. He has no idea how to feel about this.

“Which one is yours?” a voice asks from his right. Shen Yuan jumps, astonished to realize that a woman has silently sat down next to him during his brief lapse in cursing Airplane. She looks like a young mother, with a diaper bag slung over her shoulder and the kind of shoes of someone who has resigned themselves to buying comfortable rather than fashionable footwear. “Mine is with the blue parka. Yanshi.”

The boy in the blue parka seems to be the owner of the ball, and the first child Chengle started playing with. The ball is now abandoned as all the children chase after Chengle, for some reason squealing and laughing, while Chengle runs full speed away from them. It still looks like a tag you're it but maybe it shouldn't be that. Shen Yuan has no idea. Nothing in his poor health allowed him to play any of that as a child.

“The one in the green sweater,” he points to where Luo Chengle is running like a possessed child, being chased by several other children. He’s satisfied that at least half of them are running with their arms behind their backs like Naruto, “and lots of curls. Chengle.”

The woman lets out a small laugh.

“You don’t have much experience, do you?” she asks. Her eyes narrow as she smiles. “If he’s going to be playing outside, make sure he has some kind of waterproof clothing or easy-to-clean fabric. You’ll never get dirt and grass stains out of that pretty sweater.”

“Ouch,” Shen Yuan grimaces. Well, he can buy him another one, but he guesses not all parents can afford it. “I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks.”

The woman beside him laughs; Shen Yuan supposes she finds him a little pathetic. He concentrates on continuing to watch Chengle run, be caught, dart to catch other children. His laughter is spontaneous, loud, and blows against the wind as if the little boy were amazed that he was also laughing so loudly.

Little by little, the sun rises through the clouds and lunchtime arrives.

“Mom!” and the boy in the blue parka scampers toward the woman sitting next to him. A little behind him, Chengle seems to be looking at the same woman with a sour look. “I made a friend! His name is Chengle! He’s a Prince!”

Shen Yuan is grateful for a face mask so the grimace he makes isn't so obvious.

“Oh, really?” The woman smiles when her son gets close enough, handing him a bottle of water to drink. Shen Yuan begins unpacking Chengle’s water to do the same. “Well, that’s great. It’s good that my Yanshi is making contacts from now. One day, my boy could work for him and shower to his mother with expensive jewelry and gifts!”

The little boy Yanshi giggles. His breathing is labored as he drinks.

Shen Yuan lowers his mask just a little so Luo Chengle can see his encouraging smile.

“Did you have a good time?” he asks, handing him the bottle. Chengle grimaces. His cheeks are pink from the wind and running, and his sweater is, indeed, covered in ugly dirt and grass stains. Poor sweater, it won’t be the same again. “You must be tired by now. Are you hungry?”

Chengle makes an ugly face at the woman next to him.

“No,” he says, clearly sulking. “I want to go home. I don’t want to play anymore.”

“Can we play another day?” and little Yanshi turns around, his eyes shining. He’s a chubby-cheeked boy with short, messy brown hair. He’s also missing one of his front teeth. “No one ever plays with me! They say I’m boring and my clothes are ugly and cheap. But you no!! I want to play with you again!”

Chengle grimaces. Then he nods, though his ugly gaze remains on Yanshi's mother. Shen Yuan sighs; he supposes it must be difficult for the boy to trust women. He's sure that living with all the wild wives in his father's harem can't be a healthy way to establish trust with maternal figures except for his own mother.

“I usually come here with him every weekend,” says Yanshi’s mother. Her smile remains friendly. “Maybe you could play together next weekend.”

“Sure,” Shen Yuan says immediately. He doesn’t mind. After all, if Chengle stays with him a little longer, it might give the boy some joyful routine. And if his father comes back for him… Well, it’s not like Shen Yuan will ever see that woman again after all.

“Fine, then,” the woman closes her eyes as she smiles. Shen Yuan nods, gasping as he feels Chengle tug on his arm.

“I don’t want to play anymore,” the boy insists. “Let’s go. Home. *Now*.”

“Chengle,” Shen Yuan sighs. He stands up with the help of his cane, just out of habit. “Don’t you want to have a picnic? We can eat on a blanket by the lake and feed the ducks. Don’t you want to see the ducks?”

Luo Chengle pouts. He seems to seriously consider between the ducks versus returning home early. Of course, the ducks seem to win because he sighs.

“Just the two of us?” he says. There’s a strange pleading in his eyes, and Shen Yuan can only laugh, patting his head.

“Just the two of us,” he confirms, and Chengle’s smile is huge. “Now, say goodbye to your friend.”

“Yes!” Chengle lets go of Shen Yuan’s hand, hopping toward Yanshi, where he bows. “I enjoyed playing with you and with your company. I want us to continue playing together. It would be a honor for me be your friend.”

“For me too!!,” Yanshi says, jumping up and down again. Shen Yuan laughs a little as he watches the two overexcited bunnies wave goodbye.

“See you then,” says Yanshi’s mother. Shen Yuan nods, ready to thank her when Chengle quickly pulls on his hand.

“Let’s go,” he demands, almost tripping him up. Behind them, the woman laughs at them. Shen Yuan supposes he deserves it. Look at him, scrawny and miserable, being dragged by a child! “I want to see those ducks.”

They arrive at the lake. They spread the picnic blanket on the grass next to the path under the shade of some trees. It's a pleasant, though cool, day: the sun sets and peeks out every few moments. Shen Yuan, nevertheless, is satisfied. Luo Chengle seems cheerful after all, and it only takes a couple of questions for the boy to start talking about the other children, their games, how they couldn't catch him, how he is very fast—the fastest of all his brothers!—and more.

Shen Yuan serves their soups. They're still warm, though at a more palatable temperature, and Chengle watches the horizon while blowing on them and sipping. His hair has become disheveled, and there's a fair amount of sweat glistening on his face. Shen Yuan takes care of this cleaning with a wet disinfectant wipe, which he leaves in a plastic bag to throw away in a trash can. They stay there, blowing on their soups, happily sipping.

When he's out of soup and halfway through his egg sandwich, Chengle finally asks: "Is Yuan-ge going to marry Yanshi's mom?"

Shen Yuan chokes slightly on his own sandwich. He coughs, glad to be able to clear his throat easily. He swallows a large gulp of water, shaking his head with tears in the corners of his eyes. Him! Getting married! He just *met her*!

“Of course not,” he complains. He’s about to ask why he thinks that, but bites his tongue. Well, *it makes* sense that Chengle would think that. Isn’t that just how his father does the things, anyway? “Chengle, I’m not marrying Yanshi’s mom. I don’t even know her name.”

Despite this, Chengle does not seem convinced at all.

“But she was pretty,” he complains, pouting. His pouty expression shouldn’t be as adorable as it is, Shen Yuan thinks. He knows that one day he’ll lose a finger trying to pinch one of Chengle’s round cheeks and getting bitten by the boy for daring to do something like that. He figures there’s no better way to lose a finger, anyway. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not marrying her,” Shen Yuan insisted, trying to speak more firmly and less choked with shock. He wasn’t sure if the woman was pretty either. He supposed she was, by some standards, or something. She… well, she was just a woman. She wore comfortable shoes and clearly secondhand clothes. The diaper bag on her arm was also old, though sturdy. “Well, Chengle, in this world, men aren’t allowed to marry someone they just met.”

“Really?” Luo Chengle looks at him with wide, surprised eyes. It doesn’t seem like a bad surprise. “So when are they getting married?”

Shen Yuan hesitates. He doesn't know much about weddings or... long-term relationships, to be honest.

“Well, they should be two people who already know each other well,” Shen Yuan says, nodding with a gentle smile. That sounds like a good place to start. “Then, once they know each other well, they go on dates first. Dates are romantic outings between two people who have a mutual interest in, well, that develop in a romantic relationship. If all goes well, they enter a relationship. A relationship is like… being almost-spouses?” He hesitates a little. It’s not as if marriage is mandatory to maintain a stable and functional relationship these days, and it’s not as if he doesn’t know people who have maintained stable relationships without getting married for more than ten years, like his neighbors. “And only if the relationship goes very well, and they have common projects and similar goals, do they get engaged and *then* get married.”

“That sounds like a long time,” Chengle says. He doesn’t mean it as if it’s a bad thing, given the strange smile on his face. Shen Yuan guesses the boy is just processing it, amused by it all. Ah, welcome to the real world, where a man can’t marry every pretty woman he meets! “Years and years?”

“Years and years,” Shen Yuan laughs, relieved by the boy’s now joyful look. He reaches out to pat his little head. “You don’t have to worry about that. I’m not in a relationship with anyone, nor am I marrying anyone. All I’ll do while you’re here is take care of you. Is that okay?”

Luo Chengle nods, extremely satisfied. Shen Yuan exhales, relieved. It's the first time in almost his entire life that he feels relieved not to have any kind of relationship or the prospect of having one in the near future.

Finally, the ducks arrive.

“You can give them a little bit of bread,” Shen Yuan offers, tearing off a few crumbs and throwing them. The duck darts forward, pecking at the grass until it catches it. “It’s not that nutritious for them, but it fills them up a little and will make them want to play with you.”

Luo Chengle takes this as a challenge. He gives up an entire sandwich to give the ducks a pile of chopped bread. Before Shen Yuan knows it, there are at least twenty ducks surrounding them, quacking, demanding more bread, wanting to peck at Chengle's slippers while laughing and continuing to throw crumbs at them.

Shen Yuan expects to be chased by ducks, so when it happens and they have to pack up their entire picnic in record time while the ducks flap and quack around them demanding more and more food, he's actually laughing.

They walk back to the apartment after the picnic, walking slowly, with Chengle holding his hand tightly the entire way. Shen Yuan runs Chengle a bath, clean clothes, helps him dry his hair, and care for it with all the products that curly-haired child forums advertise before going in for the bath himself and putting on his warm pajamas. Then, they put on a movie, and Shen Yuan is surprised to find the boy asleep using his arm as a pillow before the movie even starts. Ah, he guesses all that exercise really tires kids out.

During the afternoon, Chengle protests but completes five full pages of the activity book. Then he draws a bunch of ducks and makes up a strange story about ducks who have a criminal empire stealing bread. Shen Yuan overhears, laughing, touched. He really has a huge imagination!

They go out again the next day to walk through some small shopping streets where they buy trinkets and wooden toys. They take it easy because Shen Yuan's body is protesting too much after two days of walking.

The next day they watch movies at home. Luo Chengle tries his first burger (and a foldable cardboard crown for his little head that he doesn't take off for the rest of the day), and Shen Yuan has too many photos of *everything*. He thinks that when Luo Binghe comes back for his son, maybe he can have some printed copies for him. What parent doesn't want lots of photos of their child having a good time?

The next day they watch movies again. The next day it rains, and Shen Yuan almost cries trying to move his numb limbs, so he stuffs himself with medication, puts on a lot of movies, and falls asleep wrapped in a blanket while Chengle watches his movies and then draws a lot, humming on his back on the carpet, filling many pages with colors and crayons.

The first week passes too quickly, long before Shen Yuan truly realizes the enormous passage of days upon them, and there is no trace of Luo Binghe.

Shen Yuan, despite quite enjoying taking care of little Chengle and not believing he's ever eaten better in his entire life living alone, might be starting to get *very* nervous.

Where *the hell* is Luo Binghe?

Chapter End Notes

SY: You see, Chengle, a man here can't marry a women he just met
LCL: THIS IS MY FAVORITE PLACE IN THE WORLDS!!!

Chengle has acquired a Yuan-ge, and now they'll have to go through his tiny paws to get a piece of him - no interested woman is going to steal him away :3 Ah, poor Shen Yuan, completely oblivious

It's completely obvious how obsessed I became with this lol you definitely can't blame me, Chengle is a baby, and I want the best for him. I need to give him the best, and now he's living in my head rent-free, demanding to walk around with Yuan-ge and be happy. What can a humble mortal like me do more than that?

Shen Yuan saw the sick and sad child, sighed, and said, "Well, I'm a mother now. I totally agree" and in my opinion he deserves all the children to take care of and spoil—hopefully without so much trauma next time, anyway
We've already been here for a week and no sign of Luo Binghe in sight!! At this point, he'll have back child support to pay when he finally come for him heheheh

Don't get used to regular updates (or will??) I'm just having fun and burning these plot bunnies :3
As always! THANK YOU SO MUCH for all your lovely comments I laughed and was touched by many of them!!! I hope you enjoyed the chapter!! Thanks for reading! Don't forget to comment and leave your kudos they brighten my day and make my days a little bit better :3 Thank you so much
See you soon!!

Chapter 3: Five days of the second week

Chapter Notes

I'm on a roll (freaking out and probably in a manic episode)
THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING AND COMMENTING, SERIOUSLY, I'M SO !!!!! EXCITED AND HAPPY, REALLY HAVING FUN WITH YOU ALL AND THIS. THANK YOU SO MUCH :D

Chapter warnings: mentions of sibling bullying, mentions of dismemberment and violence, childhood exposure to the aftermath of a violent act, Chengle ft. abandonment issues that definitely aren't abandoning him anytime soon

Enjoy the chapter! :3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's early in the second week that the two of them reach their first breaking point. Shen Yuan has rolled up his sleeves to wash the dishes (he's resigned himself to doing so. After all, leaving them piling up while he waits for the Ayi to clean isn't a good option. Besides, he doesn't have that many dishes) when Chengle suddenly stares at his arms, his expression clearly alarmed.

“You’re *not healed*,” he accuses, and it takes Shen Yuan a while to understand what he means. He’s grown accustomed to the red scratches healing over his arms and wrists, now with small, dark scabs that won’t take long to fall off and leave fine scar lines. There are yellowish bruises around his wrists that try to be greenish, too, but are barely visible—only visible because Shen Yuan doesn’t really remember the last time he was in the sun.

Shen Yuan sighs.

“There’s no qi in this world, remember?” he says, smiling reassuringly. Luo Chengle frowns, his expression somewhere between sulking and dazed. “In this world, wounds take a long time to heal. I’m just a fragile human.”

Luo Chengle doesn't seem satisfied at all with that.

“No,” he protests, and tugs at his wrist. Shen Yuan grimaces; seriously, the boy is unusually strong. “Heal.”

“I can’t,” he says, and Chengle looks at him with a clearly angry expression. “Chengle, I can’t heal myself at will. I’m healing slowly, little by little.”

“No!” Chengle slams his fist on the table. Shen Yuan flinches slightly. Usually, Luo Chengle is a pretty lively and cheerful little boy, with a few exceptions. This one seems to be a big

exception. Luo Chengle's face is flushed, his lower lip sticking out in a trembling pout, and his eyes are filled with tears. "Heal! I need you to heal!"

Shen Yuan sighs. Bracing himself against the pain in his body, he squats down to face Chengle, who stares at him with wide, watery eyes. Shen Yuan wipes a stray tear from his face with his fingers.

"I can't do it," Shen Yuan says slowly. More tears are streaming down Chengle's face, and Shen Yuan feels like something is missing. He doesn't know exactly *what,* and honestly, he's quite afraid to ask. "It's not that I don't want to. If I could, I would heal before I felt pain. It's not nice to be in pain, is it?" he asks. And Chengle shakes his head, rubbing his tearful face with his hand. "I can't do it. I must wait for it to heal itself."

Luo Chengle continues to stare at the wounds with watery eyes. Shen Yuan supposes that *technically* they might look like pretty ugly wounds to someone unused to seeing wounds in a world of demons and cultivators who heal themselves without scars. To Shen Yuan, they're nothing more than cat scratches that sting a little, but nothing too serious.

"But it's my fault," Luo Chengle says, and finally, more tears fall. "I hurt Yuan-ge. Yuan-ge has to heal."

Shen Yuan sighs. He pulls Luo Chengle into a hug. The boy tenses, and only a moment later, his crying worsens ferociously. Shen Yuan sighs, sinking down onto the floor, letting the boy climb into his lap to sob his heart out against his shoulder while Shen Yuan hums, rubbing his back, leaving soft strokes against his hair.

"It's not right," the boy stammers, hiccuping. "I hurt Yuan-ge. Yuan-ge must hate me."

"I don't hate you," Shen Yuan swears, with as much confidence in his voice as he can muster. "It was an accident. Right, baby? You felt sicky bad and had no control over anything, not even yourself. Now, you're better. I know you wouldn't hurt me as long as you had control of that, because you're a good, well-behaved boy. Aren't you?"

Luo Chengle cries louder. Shen Yuan coos for a while longer, letting the child cry and sniffle into his sweatshirt. Well, babysitting duties, he supposes. All his clothes will eventually end up with dubious stains.

"I didn't want to," Chengle says, his voice low. "I didn't want to hurt Yuan-ge."

"I know," Shen Yuan hums, cooing. He wipes his tears with his fingers. "You're a very good boy and you behave very well. I know you didn't mean to."

The child's crying takes a long time to stop. They stay there, both sprawled on the floor. Chengle sobs into his shoulder, and Shen Yuan rocks him gently, as if he were nothing more than a baby being hummed a tune to calm it. He supposes it's normal. An appropriate way to soothe children, isn't it? He assumes it is.

So:

“I don’t like hurting,” Luo Chengle says, softly, so softly that Shen Yuan isn’t entirely sure he heard him. And then: “Father Emperor hurts. I don’t want to be like him.”

Shen Yuan takes a shaky breath. He hugs Chengle a little closer, a little tighter.

“What do you mean?” he asks. Luo Chengle curls up closer, as if he could hide inside Shen Yuan’s neck if he pushed just a little bit harder.

“Father Emperor does horrible things,” he whispers, his voice trembling. He hiccups, and when he snuggles up, he seems to shrink in his arms. “He is… evil.”

Shen Yuan exhales a shaky breath. He turns his face away from Chengle slightly. He feels his own hands tremble as he wipes the tears from his eyes, holding his face to stare into his swollen, tear-filled eyes.

Oh, poor little thing. He looks terrified.

“Did your father ever hurt *you*?” he asks. He has no idea where he gets the nerve to ask that. He doesn’t even know if he wants to know, but once he asks, he feels *furious*. Luo Binghe wasn’t supposed to be… such a bad father! He himself should learn from his own past with his mother how to be a good father, whether or not he had a childhood and youth screwed up by that stupid asshole Shen Qingqiu!

Fortunately, Luo Chengle shakes his head. Shen Yuan gives a short exhalation of relief, just short enough before the boy, his voice trembling, says:

“Not to me,” he murmurs, his voice shaking. “But… I saw what he did to *that* man. In the dungeons. He…”

Shen Yuan feels as if his belly button is being pulled, a sickening, dizzying sensation. Only from the trembling in Chengle's terrified voice does he know exactly who he's talking about.

Fuck.

“I didn’t mean to!” the boy raises his voice. He sobs more than he screams. “Zuo-ge was going to tell Father Emperor that I cheated on training because I arrived before him! It was a lie! But the my brothers don’t like me! They all have a big room in the harem and they hate that I have my room in Mother’s pavilion! They’re always pushing me and pulling my hair and stealing my food, just like Shao-mei and An-ge! They’re rude and mean to us!” By this point, Chengle is hiccuping, trembling like a tiny leaf. Shen Yuan grips him as tightly as his hands can, feeling that if he lets go, the little boy might fall apart. “I… I wanted to tell Father Emperor that it was a lie. Zuo-ge was going to accuse me and Father Emperor was going to punish me because he always believes everyone except me! The servants side with them because their mothers pay them for that, and Father Emperor never believes me! Never, never!!”

Luo Chengle hiccups loudly. Shen Yuan takes it upon himself to hug him tightly, clinging to him and letting the child be held in his arms. He doesn't know if he's trembling too, or if it's Chengle's trembling in his arms that's making him do.

“I… I went to find Father Emperor in the dungeon,” Chengle says, hiccuping. “It was cold and horrible. But Zuo-ge said he would go to the dungeon to tell him. So I had to get there first!” and the boy sniffles, hiccuping two, three times forcefully. Shen Yuan tries to calm him, humming ‘*shhhh’* quietly as he rocks him against his body. “Father Emperor… wasn’t there. But… But… Was… *that.* He was *scary*. Yuan-ge, he didn’t have arms! Or legs! And his eye looked so dark and scary! So terrifying! He started laughing when he saw me, he laughed a lot and he didn’t have a tongue in his mouth and it sounded so… so…!”

“Shhh,” Shen Yuan repeats. Chengle trembles, sobbing harder. “Take a deep breath, okay baby? It’ll hurt you to breathe so hard. Breathe with me, sweetie.”

Chengle obeys. He takes deep, shaky breaths. He keeps hiccuping.

Shen Yuan sighs, making an effort that already feels like it's hurting his muscles to stand up while carrying Chengle. The child hugs him with his arms and legs, which helps a little, and he's not that heavy. Shen Yuan carefully carries him, hugging him, while he sits him on the kitchen counter, where he turns on the tap to rinse his red, swollen, tear-stained face.

“What you saw was horrible,” he admits, once he finds the strength to speak. “It’s not something you should have seen, and I’m so sorry.”

Luo Chengle hiccups as Shen Yuan continues rinsing his face. He uses the sleeves of his hoodie to dry it, wiping away tears and snot, resigning himself to the fact that it will end up in the washing machine sooner rather than later.

“Being a Demon Emperor like your father means… some things must be done violently,” Shen Yuan says. He’s not trying to sugarcoat anything—of course, Chengle is too young to understand even a hint of Luo Binghe’s cruelty or past—but something inside him twists. He’s uncomfortable, upset, and honestly, horrified. He can barely cope with himself, and he has to deal with calming the traumatized little boy. Ah, that’s definitely why Shen Yuan hasn’t married and had children. Among many other reasons, of course. “I’m not saying it’s right, but you’re his son. Your father may be horrible to those who deserve such treatment, but to those he loves, he would never be mean.”

“You’re lying,” Chengle says. Shen Yuan is about to open his mouth, but the boy slaps his hand away from his face. It stings a little, and Shen Yuan grimaces. “Father Emperor doesn’t love me. He doesn’t love anyone! Not me, not brothers, not sisters! Not mother, not any of the wives! Father Emperor has no heart to love!”

“Chengle,” Shen Yuan feels his voice is an anguished exhalation. He… he actually can’t say that Luo Binghe loves his wives. Desires them, cherishes them? Well, of course. But a lasting, constant love… that’s not forged in the three to five chapters of stupid Airplane’s wife plot. And the children? Not that Shen Yuan knows much. If he had to rely on the narrative from PIDW’s Luo Binghe perspective, the children were barely mentioned, nameless background figures. Was that what they were to Luo Binghe? Shen Yuan looks at Luo Chengle’s tearful, sulking face in front of him and can feel his chest burning. “Life hasn’t been kind to your father, never before. It’s not that Luo Binghe doesn’t have the heart to love. It’s that…” and thinks, sadly, of the only person who truly *loved* Luo Binghe, the woman who, expecting nothing in return, gave him a name and a home. “Think of your

father's heart as if it were asleep, okay? It was in so much pain, and it went to sleep. So, asleep, it can't hurt when it's hurt. And because he's a great and powerful Emperor, many want to hurt him. With his heart asleep, they can't hurt him there. Do you understand?"

Shen Yuan doesn't understand what he's saying either. Surprisingly, it seems to make some sense to Chengle, who sniffs and nods. Shen Yuan sighs, wetting his hand again and carefully running it over the boy's swollen face. Poor, poor, adorable little thing.

"If you're a priest and you have a temple for Father, can Yuan-ge pray for his heart to awaken?" Chengle says. The way he says the words shouldn't hurt as much as it hurts Shen Yuan, like a stab to his chest. "I don't want it to be asleep. I want him to love me very much, like Mother. Mother loves me very much. But even she replaced me."

"Hey," Shen Yuan tugged at his cheek. "Mmm, I think your mother is a very good person, and very wonderful. I don't think she could ever replace you."

"Lie," Chengle mumbles. Then, his watery eyes look at Shen Yuan pleadingly. "But Yuan-ge will never replace me, will he?"

Shen Yuan snorts.

"Have you seen yourself?" He gently pulls at his other cheek. It's soft, warm beneath his icy fingers, and very red. "You're the smartest, fastest, strongest, and cutest boy in all the world. In all the worlds! How could I ever replace you? No, no. And even if they tried, no one could. There's only one you." He touches the tip of his nose. Luo Chengle's smile is fragile, trembling. "And it's you that this Yuan-ge of yours appreciate very much."

Shen Yuan finds himself squeezed in a fierce hug that makes his back crack. The positive: it relieved a dull ache he wasn't aware of was there. The negative: the lump in his throat itself creeps up to his eyes, even more so when he returns the hug to the small, traumatized, trembling boy on the kitchen counter.

Shen Yuan sighs. When Luo Binghe comes for him, he'll pluck up his courage and have *a few* words with him. After all, he promised Chengle, and what kind of self-appointed babysitter would he be if he didn't keep such an important promise?

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

By the middle of the second week, Shen Yuan realizes that he must stop expecting Luo Binghe to step through a portal at any moment.

Luo Binghe will come looking for his son, yeah, *definitely*. At some point. *Hopefully*. But he was probably too busy doing his… Emperor stuff. And Protagonist stuff. Like courting women and leading wars. And courting more wives. And getting married. The life of a stallion Protagonist must be extremely busy for the man not to *actually* come running to find his missing son, right?

…Shen Yuan avoids thinking about what that means.

Eventually, he also reads the last chapter of PIDW.

For the shit-eating bastard Airplane to call it “end” is blasphemy: after its publication Airplane has daily released one more chapter after another of “extras” exploring ridiculous papapa scenarios with the most voted wives (with votes that would probably be worth paid coins of the site. Typical asshole.)

And Shen Yuan is enraged. What's with this stupid end, what thing done that dumbfuck author for that dumbfuck novel? However, as he reads the ending of Shen Qingqiu, the final revenge arc that ends with almost no real sense of climax as Shen Qingqiu meets his death by the Sect Leader's broken sword, Shen Yuan feels…

Good. Bad. *Empty*.

It's not a good ending.

The comments celebrate the Luo Binghe's final rise. Shen Yuan leaves only a single comment, many days after the most recent comments posted hours or at most a day after the chapter was published. He writes a simple: "You call *that* the end, you son of a bitch?" and sends it. Just that. Nothing more.

He turns off his screen and doesn't even glance through all the papapa extras. He... he definitely doesn't want to think about Luo Binghe humping one of the wives right now, when Chengle is taking a nap after returning from the flea market to buy edible seeds and stupid health snacks that his brothers would be proud Shen Yuan was stuffing himself with instead of potato chips.

The next day, he's surprised to find a reply to his comment. A response from Airplane himself, yelling at him in all caps: "CUCUMBER-BRO, YOU'RE ALIVE! I thought you died of anger or something. I was starting to feel guilty :D"

…the audacity of that damn motherfucker.

Shen Yuan ignores his message and goes on with his day. They go for a walk with Chengle. They go to a painted-kite workshop together, where both of their clothes end up with more paint than their paper kites. Chengle laughs a lot, a sweet, pealing laugh that makes all the ladies and their sons at the nearby tables look at them fondly. Shen Yuan almost wants to show off. Isn't Chengle the sweetest, most adorable of them all? Look at that little face covered in paint! Look at the way he sticks out the tip of his tongue, trying to concentrate while he paints! Isn't their sweet boy the most talented, the brightest?

But of course, Chengle isn't *his*. It feels like he's been hit with a fucking bucket of ice water that pathetically ruins his mood for the rest of the day. Well, of course Chengle *isn't* his! He's Luo Binghe's son! Shen Yuan is just babysitting and trying to gift the wild little boy with lots of nice experiences to try and help him be happy!

But when they leave, promising to return to look for the painted kites when they are dry over the weekend, and Chengle takes his hand, jumping happily as he talks about flying that kite really high and begins to tell him about singing birds with feathered wings that glow during

the day but turn dark at night, Shen Yuan can only sigh and hold his hand tightly, not wanting to let him go.

Ah, what a lovely child he is caring for.

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Before the weekend arrives, Friday arrives first. And there's a ring on his doorbell.

“Did Yuan-ge ask for something on Internet?” Chengle asks, curious. He’s halfway through his activity book with the pages Shen Yuan has assigned him for the day. They’re not complicated, all within the level and understanding of a six-year-old, and Shen Yuan is quite pleased with the progress Chengle has made, even though he occasionally has to sit next to him to explain everything in detail. The good thing, too, is that Chengle understands many simplified characters that otherwise wouldn’t make sense, which makes him a better candidate every day to receive his first fairy tales of his own to read before bed.

“Not today,” Shen Yuan says, standing up and walking to the door. He pats Chengle on the head as he passes. “Maybe cleaning Ayi arrived earlier…?”

His words fall silent as he opens the door.

“Surprise!” says his sister, smiling broadly. Her skin is flecked with a healthy pink and a light golden tan. Shen Yuan clutches the doorframe, feeling like he’s going to faint. Meimei, aren’t you supposed to be in Thailand?! “I brought candy and souvenirs! What, do I look *so* different? Mom really will hate that, right?”

Shen Yuan feels his heart pounding in his throat. His brain is a repetitive stream of *shit, shit, shit* repeating itself on an unhealthy loop. How the hell can he credibly explain to his Meimei that he's now babysitting a child? It's not like he was ever a fan of children!

Any excuse he might have is killed when Chengle, in a curious little voice behind him, says: “Yuan-ge, who is?”

“Uh?” Meimei tilts her head at the tiny voice. “Ge, what do you got there?”

Shen Yuan is on the verge of saying “a smoothie,” hysterically. He takes a deep breath and opens the door, allowing both Meimei and Chengle to see them.

Clearly, Chengle is on the defensive.

“Who is *she*?” he mumbles reluctantly, quickly hiding behind Shen Yuan’s legs. Shen Yuan sighs again.

“Meimei,” he says, and his sister wears a dumb, shocked expression. “Welcome. Let me introduce you. This is Chengle, the son of… a friend. I’m looking after him while my friend handles personal matters.”

“Wow,” Meimei looks at him with a face that speaks without words. Shen Yuan can read in her both a ‘Do *you have* any friends?’ and a ‘Did your friend leave his son *with you?’*.

Honestly, he's not offended at all. It's not like he recognizes himself in all the stupid shopping and other things he's been doing when it comes to Chengle. "And I was hoping to surprise Ge. Ge's the one surprising me the most."

Meimei comes in. Shen Yuan closes the door, slumping his shoulders, resigning himself to… whatever is going to happen next.

"Yuan-ge," Chengle protests, tugging at the hem of his sweater. "Is she staying?" he whispers, clearly in a bad mood. Shen Yuan, contrary to his expectations, finds himself smiling. Really, this child…

"She's my little sister," he says, making a boop sound on the tip of Chengle's nose. The boy jumps, looking at his Meimei with curious eyes. "Her name is Shen Yuming. Aren't you going to say hi to her?"

Chengle, still clinging to his leg, pouts. When Shen Yuan tries to give him a slightly stern look, the boy sighs, letting go and walking the few steps to Meimei's side, bowing nicely and politely.

"An honor to meet you, Meimei of my Yuan-ge," he says, and Shen Yuan bites the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. He doesn't know who's having a weirder time, Chengle or his Meimei, whose eyes look as if they're about to pop out of her head.

"Aiya," his sister sighs, lifting his little head. Chengle tries to back away, but can barely, colliding with Shen Yuan, who has stepped forward to stop the child from running away. "Aren't you such a cute little boy? Look at you, such pretty cheeks. You're eating well, aren't you, little one? And that hair! It's so pretty!"

Of course, Chengle turns red all the way to the roots of his hair. Shen Yuan pats his head, now laughing.

"Yuan-ge takes care of it for me!" Chengle says quickly. "With that hairdryer! Diffuser! And all those weird-smelling creams!"

Shen Yuan laughs a little. He pats Chengle on the head.

"Go finish your homework," he says, and Chengle seems to deflate, relieved to be able to slip away. He's not really that sociable a kid, is he? Like a kitten who wants to hide when guests come over. "Then we can have some dessert and watch a movie if you want. Okay?"

"Yes!" Chengle jumps up and down, bows again to Meimei, and runs to the table. Shen Yuan finds himself following him with his eyes, moved.

At the same time, Meimei pinches his side.

"Ouch," he protests, as his sister nearly drags him into the living room. She drops several gift and shopping bags on the table and drags him to the couch. "There, there. How was your travel, Meimei?"

“That doesn’t matter now!” she complains. “Whose son is he? I don’t know anyone who looks like him,” she whispers, pointing to where Chengle is. From the living room, Shen Yuan can see through the half-open door that leads to the kitchen-dining room, where Chengle sits, kicking his legs as he rushes to finish his homework. “Shouldn’t he be at school?”

Shen Yuan grimaces.

“Homeschooling,” he explains. Meimei snorts, clearly not believing it. “He’s, uh. Well, he’s the son of a friend I met… online.”

“Don’t fuck with me,” Meimei slumps dramatically against the couch. Shen Yuan isn’t even going to reprimand her for her language: Meimei is nineteen, almost twenty, and if she wants to swear, she can. “A-Yuan, how do you know the man didn’t kidnap a child and then give it to you? I mean, it’s the internet. There are a lot of… crazy people on the internet.”

Shen Yuan lets out a deep sigh.

“He looks just like his father,” he says. Not that he’s ever met Luo Binghe. In fact, he’s not entirely sure how much of Chengle’s tender face resembles Luo Binghe or Liu Mingyan: it’s as if the best aspects of each of them have been painted onto his sweet little face, with the sweet, tender mole under his eye that Shen Yuan sometimes wanted to kiss goodnight there, only for the boy to writhe with laughter and then demand more cuddles and more affection. He really was clingy at times, especially when he is about to fall asleep. “That’s true, Meimei. Chengle is a good boy, well-behaved. And I can take care of him.”

“Uh-huh,” and Meimei doesn’t agree at all. “And how will you deal with your pain? What will you feed him with?”

Shen Yuan snorts.

“I have medicine, and I hired someone to cook. I know how to use a microwave and a microwave oven without burning down the house,” he protests, grimacing. Meimei sighs. “I know you don’t trust me to be able to take care of him, but he… well. The situation he came into was fragile, and I think he was like a baby duckling imprinting on someone. I don’t trust him to be safe with anyone else right now.”

Ridiculously and strangely, as soon as he says it, he knows it's true. It's as if the words that have been stewing in his mind, simmering under the shadow of his own indifference to his own thoughts, are now bursting forth fresh and simmering. It's true. He truly doesn't think he can trust Chengle—sweet, explosive Chengle—with anyone.

Meimei sighs. She rubs her temples, tired.

“If you had told me you were babysitting, I would have brought him something,” he complains then, and Shen Yuan finds himself with a strange lump in his throat. He smiles, and Meimei looks at him with a strange expression. “Oh, no, you’re going to cry. Why are you going to cry?”

“I’m not going to cry,” Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. He clears his throat, moving to reach for his water bottle and take a sip. It’s actually great to have several recyclable water bottles around —he never knows when he might need medication! Totally helpful! “Don’t be ridiculous. What did you bring?”

Meimei, a little more relaxed now that tears are no longer on the horizon, begins the story of her trip. Apparently, a travel agency had hired her to cover the *Loy Krathong Festival*, so even though it was a vacation, it was also quite a work trip creating content for various networks, taking lots of photos, getting brands for advertising, sales or exchanges.

Shen Yuming was a star who shone on her own. Unlike her siblings, she cared little about family heritage and business. She had started creating modeling content and branding online and had landed contracts with international brands even before she was twenty. The dream of any teenager with access to social media, Shen Yuan supposes. No one would assume that she and he, of all the Shen siblings, were siblings.

She excitedly tells him details of her trip: eating fried insects for the views and discovering they actually tasted like chili fries, covering herself almost from her shoulders to her ankles in a blanket to enter the temples, how on the second day she was able to go to the beach in the middle of the turquoise waters she was caught in a sudden downpour out of nowhere that did nothing to alleviate the stifling heat, the festival itself, then monkeys trying to steal her camera...

“Sounds like a real mess,” Shen Yuan hums as she unwraps the gifts. There are all trinkets: magnets, keychains, carved soaps, elephant figurines for good luck or something like that. Shen Yuan is very grateful for the Thai tiger balm to ease his aches and pains, and for the sweets.

Eventually, Chengle joins in. Shen Yuan is under no illusion that the boy hasn't been listening to what they've been talking about, and when he climbs onto the sofa in the middle of the story about Meimei being chased by a monkey, his little face flashes with wonder. She then shows them several photos she's taken, both personal and for social media—Shen Yuan had seen some of them on the family group, but without the stories behind them—and Chengle stares, wide-eyed, in wonder at the lanterns floating on the water.

“It’s so pretty!” he says. And Meimei beams at him.

She tells a couple more anecdotes. She shares some candy and peanuts with Chengle, who doesn't refuse a single thing, stuffing his cheeks like a hamster. When Meimei has to leave because she'll otherwise be too late to have dinner with their parents, Chengle “bye-bye” her in a much better mood than when she arrived.

Which leads to: “Yuan-ge, Yuan-ge, where can we see monkeys?”

Shen Yuan buys tickets to the zoo for Monday, when he knows it won't be as crowded due to school schedules and they can walk around without the risk of crowds. Then, even though it's late afternoon, he takes Chengle for a short run in the park to burn off the sugar. They eat chicken sandwiches outside, and when Shen Yuan takes a photo of Chengle, rosy-cheeked

and slightly disheveled, trying to bite into a giant sandwich, he realizes he has someone to send it to.

He opens the chat with Meimei and sends it. He adds: "I had to take him for a run so he could burn off all the sugar you put in his body."

Meimei is quick to respond with a “!!!!!” “KAWAII” and a long string of kaomojis that make him roll his eyes.

Then, Meimei: "Mom wants to know if he'll continue homeschooling or if you need her to find him a good school for the kiddo. You know, she could get him a really good one."

That night, after a bath and the promised dessert and movie, Shen Yuan stays up a little longer than he should, watching Chengle sleep from his chair at the desk. The boy sleeps with his mouth half open, his curly hair in a loose braid. The next day they will go to the park so Chengle can run and play with his park friend again. Chengle had been very excited about it.

It hasn't been that long, but Luo Chengle has been... improving. Somehow. The few times he has nightmares, he's no longer woken up by startles and crying, he sleeps through the night, eats everything he needs, and they have a good routine of going out, walking, and coming back. He hasn't become addicted to screens as Shen Yuan feared, and he feels quite capable of offering to play some games for a controlled period of time, once he's checked out which ones might be entertaining and cozy without the unnecessary violence that makes Chengle so nervous.

Now, the boy is clingy, quite smiley, much less likely to give the look of a demonic child capable of moving things with his mind. He is far from a jovial or cheerful child, and he still looks askance whenever Shen Yuan speaks to anyone, especially women. However, it is clear that he believes him much more, demands much less, and when Shen Yuan promises something, he only has to repeat the promise two or three times before the boy decides to believe him.

Luo Chengle is… happier, somehow. He definitely looks a lot happier here, in Shen Yuan's apartment and with a strangely consistent routine, than he seemed to be when he first arrived. There's a softer roundness to his cheeks, and the slenderness in his body no longer seems like pure fiber. There are soft, childlike roundnesses here and there, just from a few days of overeating all the time, whenever the boy says he's hungry. And, even if Shen Yuan takes him out to run and play, it's true that he already looks more…

Well. He looks more like a normal kid.

It's a long road, Shen Yuan supposes, until he's the jovial, cheerful, and fun-loving boy he could be. Shen Yuan sees glimpses of it when he finishes a complex drawing, or when he sees that Shen Yuan has replaced the Luo Binghe posters on his walls with many of Chengle's drawings. He sees glimpses of the joy a child must have when Shen Yuan serves him his favorite soup from Ayi, or when he buys peas because he likes them so much. He sees glimpses of that happiness shining through when Shen Yuan compliments him, of that relaxation and care a child would need when he's drying and caring for his hair, setting the

curls with his hands for a long time to make his hairstyle cute, and when he runs around, they bounce from his high ponytail.

Shen Yuan closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and makes a decision. With a sigh, he reaches for his phone and texts the last person he'd ever want to ask for help. He's not even surprised when half a minute later his screen lights up with an incoming call.

He doesn't even complain anymore when he stands up when answering, leaving the room.

“What do you need?” asks his Er-ge.

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

“Good evening, Jiu-ge. It’s been a long time since we last spoke,” Shen Yuan hums, his tone feigning a false friendliness. He doesn’t often speak to his brother, not because he doesn’t like him or because they don’t get along; in fact, they usually communicate well… a couple of times a year when they meet for obligatory celebrations. “It’s been so long since I’ve heard from you. Can’t this younger brother want to know how his brother is doing without needing something from him to speak to him?”

“It’s not in your nature to be anything other than a hateful little piece of shit,” Jiu-ge says with a sigh. He doesn’t sound angry about it, just resigned. Shen Yuan supposes he’s right, anyway. It’s not like Shen Yuan can’t be a piece of shit when he feels like it and the people around him deserve it. “What do you need?”

Shen Yuan leaves the door ajar behind him. He collapses onto the sofa, forcing himself to breathe.

“Do you think you can forge some documents for me?” he asks.

His brother remains silent for at least twenty seconds.

“It depends,” Jiu-ge says then. “How many, which ones, what you want to do with it.”

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath that stings his lungs and says: “I need to know if you can forge identification papers for a child who has no papers whatsoever. Birth certificate, biometric records, documentation, passports. Everything he would needs.”

“You *kidnapped* a child?” Jiu-ge asks. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes because he doesn’t even seem surprised or horrified by it. Come on, seriously! Out of everyone in the world, Shen Yuan definitely *wouldn’t* be the brother to do something as criminal as that! Seriously, no!

“No,” he says firmly. “He’s the son of a friend without papers.”

“Illegal migrant?” Jiu-ge asks. There’s a rather somber tone in his voice. Shen Yuan has no idea what he could be imagining, but the fact is that if it will help him get Chengle suitable papers at a good school if he stays longer, or take him on a trip somewhere exciting, he’ll let him think whatever he wants.

“Something like that,” he confirms. “What do you need and how long will it take?”

There are noises from Jiu-ge's side. It sounds like computer typing, a couple of muffled sounds, another tap, and finally a cautious silence.

"Get me a good ID photo, a fingerprint, and I'll have the most important ones for you by the end of next week. But you'll have to pick them up at the dinner Mother's hosting for that Sunday; she's been asking for you for *weeks*. And bring the child."

Shen Yuan smiles. Ah, how adorable his brother is, who would have thought, showing such an interest? Only his dear Jiu-ge can invite him to dinner with the family in a way that might seem like a mandatory duty for such a criminal act.

“Deal.”

Chapter End Notes

SY: Of course Luo Binghe is my favorite character, and I worship him
SY: *hugging a traumatized Chengle* That's exactly why I'm not demanding he be castrated right now

Meimei: Wow, I didn't see Ge babysitting
Meimei, an hour later: Wow, Mom must find out she's a grandmother now; she'll be so happy

Chengle facing the misfortunes of human life and suffering about it. Oh, honey, I suffered with you. I'm so sorry
I can't get out of my head how shocking it is for a child accustomed to all wounds being healed in minutes by qi to be horrified by wounds that persist days after they were inflicted. My poor baby is definitely having a bad mental trip
Also, I don't know if anyone had ANY doubts about the exact reason why Chengle ran away... well, he has SOME important reasons, but we already discovered some of that very important ones ;D

Shen Yuan already read (and definitely hated) the ending of PIDW, gave Airplane a sign of life, and now we have a Meimei and a Jiu-ge knowing that Shen Yuan has acquired a sweet baby! This is definitely going to get funnier now, don't you think?

Again, thank you SO much for reading and commenting. I'm genuinely LAUGHING SO MUCH at all your comments and enjoying this journey. Genuinely enjoying writing and sharing this practically in real time with you all lol thank you so much, I really appreciate it!
Oh, I hope you enjoyed the chapter a lot, so you know, I'm just a comment - kudo - interaction away! You really make me so happy, and I always appreciate it :3
See you soon!

Chapter 4: Weekend of the second week

Chapter Notes

HEY GUYSSS how dare you make me cry by worrying about my health? I love you thank you so much
I promise I'm fine!! For now. I'll get a huge blues when my manic episode is over but heeey I'm on a roll right now and totally making the most of it!!! Anyway, these things happen but really thank you so much for caring :3
I love you so much THANK YOU SO MUCH for all these comments I'm freaking out have you really seen??? Wow WOW thank you THANK YOU I LOVE YOU SO MUCH

Chapter warnings !!! : Airplane and his filthy mouth, more mentions of Shen Yuan's health issues, some internalized self-ableism in Shen Yuan

Enjoy the chapter!!! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Cheng-ge!” the young boy Yanshi recognizes him as soon as they both arrive at the park. This time, Shen Yuan has put a lilac lightweight jacket on Chengle, and he looks at Shen Yuan for approval before letting go of his hand and running over to where the boy in the blue parka greets him, both hands raised.

“Yanshi!”

Shen Yuan smiles, sinking down onto the bench as the children greet each other. They chat a little while passing the ball around. Shen Yuan notices small details: the boy is wearing the same blue parka, slightly worn at the sleeves, and the same sneakers. He doesn't seem to be wearing new or well-kept clothes like Chengle's, and Shen Yuan grimaces and supposes it *makes* sense. He doesn't know the family situation of the little boy and his mother, but he doesn't think they're from a wealthy family from downtown.

“Oh, you really came,” says Yanshi’s mom, sitting next to him. She’s wearing the same comfortable shoes, too, though a much warmer jacket. “Yanshi couldn’t stop talking about his new friend. The closer the weekend got, the harder it was to shut him up. You wouldn’t believe it.”

Shen Yuan laughs a little. Not that he needs to imagine it: Chengle had been talking about Yanshi every chance he got. Shen Yuan supposes it must be different for him to share and play not only with a child who isn't his brother, but with a child who isn't rude to him. Yanshi seemed to be around the same age as Chengle, and he didn't seem like a child with many

friends either, given the fact that there were quite a few children in the park, but they only came up to play with him when Chengle was around.

“Chengle was also looking forward to today,” Shen Yuan says, pulling out his phone, which hasn’t stopped vibrating for as long as he could tell. He’s a little surprised to see his lock screen—oh, he’s not sure when he replaced that Binghe fanart with a picture of Chengle with that huge Totoro plush, but it really is a nice picture. “I’m glad he has a friend. He needs friends.”

The children begin kicking the ball away and running after it. Shen Yuan watches them with a smile hidden behind his face mask. Genuinely, Chengle seemed to look more like a normal, not-so-traumatized child when playing with Yanshi. And Yanshi's smile was huge. They looked happy, and Shen Yuan could only approve of that.

“Yanshi too,” sighs the woman beside him. “I haven’t introduced myself, by the way. I’m Li Xiaofeng. A pleasure to meet you, rich stranger.”

Shen Yuan lets his smile show in his eyes. Well, he guesses it's kind of obvious that he doesn't need money.

“The pleasure is mine. I’m Shen Yuan.”

They fall silent after that. It's not exactly an awkward silence, really. Shen Yuan is still catching his breath a little from the walk; it's not a good day for his muscles, and he's pretty sure the dull throb in his side is from popping so many painkillers lately. He's sure he should make a doctor's appointment for a checkup, but all his doctor's appointments end up in exhausting succession of many other doctors and so much time invested in hospitals.

Now… well, Shen Yuan doesn't have much time to spend going to the doctor and all those things.

His phone keeps vibrating. Shen Yuan grimaces, unlocking it and finding an inordinate amount of… forum emails? Private messages on Zhongdian? What the *hell*?

With a sigh, Shen Yuan opens the emails first. Apparently, this is typical lately: it's become something of a meme in the PIDW fan community, where people tag him, imitate him, try to speak like him, quote his old comments, all to criticize Airplane's new updates half-mockingly and half-seriously. Some genuinely send him messages asking if everything is okay or tag him in comments that the comments section is empty and the chapters are incomplete without his critiques. There are entire absurd posts theorizing whether he died and transmigrated, or whatever the hell happened to him to make him disappear completely from the map.

Shen Yuan snorts. He's just a whiny, judgmental person; he doesn't really contribute anything but hateful complaints, and almost always, a bunch of comments respond by mocking him about it. Shen Yuan isn't entirely sure that makes him an important part of the community, but it seems to be something the other users simply decided.

Then, his private messages.

He has more than ten private messages from Airplane. The same fucking AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky. The dumbfuck author in flesh.

“What the heck?” he hisses and opens the window. He moves toward the first few with a confused expression:

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: heey cucumber bro look i know it's pathetic of me but was the end-chapter of pidw *that* bad for you?

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: i mean you haven't commented since then

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: you haven't even bought new episodes

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: not even commenting on the extras votes with some ridiculous comment about 'less wives and more monsters' or anything that makes everyone call you a monsterfucker

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: not that i think you're a monsterfucker i mean

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: it wouldn't be so bad if you were either btw

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: i mean also your last comment was so dispassionate???

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: look i know i sound pathetic and ridiculous but

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: your commentaries was always something i really enjoyed so much bro. you always seemed genuinely interested in the story rather than wife hunting and cheap porn.

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: yeah bro i know it was cheap porn i had to write 10k words a day, I needed to recycle sometimes!!!1!

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: i just wanted to say. okay. i have some drafts. and outlines and lore and things that you've always found interesting

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: and

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: well i don't know. i'm pathetic and your attention fueled my ego more than all the other comments. if you're done with the extras would you be willing to read some of my drafts?

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: totally free btw not that i'm going to publish it anywhere who cares besides you? lol

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: just that. tell me what you think :)

Shen Yuan stares at the screen with a puzzled expression. He rubs his temples in frustration. Well, *that* was new. He'd never exchanged private messages with Airplane before, and all their rare mutual interactions had been confined to comments, meme tags, or mutual teasing in forums. He was… just an idiot author doing stupid things for a story with good potential. Shen Yuan had never found a reason to message him, and honestly, he wouldn't have believed Airplane would message him if he'd been told.

“Work problems?” Li Xiaofeng asks from beside him. Shen Yuan hesitates a moment, then nods. Well, normal people are supposed to have jobs and responsibilities. It’s at least easier to explain than telling her that the author of a stallion novel is sending him private messages offering to read unpublished drafts and manuscripts of his story.

“Something like that,” he says. He stares at the chat window, clueless. He lets his fingers hover over the screen for a moment, then two. Then he sighs and types:

PeerlessCucumber: Fine. I'll read your shitty drafts.

PeerlessCucumber: Don't be such a miserable attention whore. I'll pay for them.

PeerlessCucumber: Make them privately subscribed chapters and tag me on those so that only my account have access to.

PeerlessCucumber: If you're selling yourself out by writing that cheap, trashy papapa extra, you probably need that money more than I do.

He practically jumps out of his seat when, as soon as he sends the messages, he marks them both as received and read. What the fuck?! Had Airplane been waiting, freaking out in front of his chat window? Did that bastard have no life?!

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: CUCUMBER BRO

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: THANK YOU AND BLESS YOUR CUCUMBER

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: lol honestly i don't even care if you pay i just want you to read me again. i wither like a fucking flower without sunlight with your comments bro :(

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Damn exaggerated shrieker. Seriously, was that pathetic little man supposed to have created Luo Binghe's magnanimous, absolutist power fantasy? How was something as wonderful as Luo Binghe supposed to come from the mind of someone like him?

PeerlessCucumber: I'll destroy your writing and pay you for it. I only see you making a profit. Stop complaining and use that time to write something decent.

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: YES CUCUMBER-BRO!! AS MY SUGAR CUCUMBER ORDER!!!

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: THANK YOU!!!

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: btw if you want to talk to me directly and complain about anything my number is

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: [contact]

AirplaneShootingTowardstheSky: please don't disappear again bro

Shen Yuan snorts. He copies the number, adds it to his contacts, and searches for it in his messaging app. The public profile picture is of a not-too-old-man about his age with thick glasses, in a selfie so badly taken that even Shen Yuan, who isn't a regular selfie-taker like his sister or even his Jiu-ge and his vanity stupid face, could take a better one.

ShenY: What kind of huge M gives someone his number so they can complain about anything in his chat? Seriously?

ShangHH: BRO ?????

ShangHH: if your family name is really Shen i'm going to die

ShenY: Fuck you.

He turns off his screen and puts his phone aside, another exasperated huff. He focuses on the park around him, trying hard to clear his mind. It's a considerably colder day, and he's wearing a thick scarf, as well as an extra jacket for when Chengle finishes playing and doesn't get cold on the walk home. His muscles burn even sitting still.

Chengle's laughter as he chases the ball to kick it first and is followed by other children trying to catch him or the ball first is something that honestly makes all the pain worth it.

"I'm surprised to see Yanshi playing with so many children," Li Xiaofeng says, and Shen Yuan is… well, surprised. It's not that he'd forgotten she was there, it's just… well. He'd gotten too wrapped up in his own thoughts. "At his school, the children don't want to play with my little Yanshi. And just because your child plays with him, the others want to play too."

“Chengle has charisma,” Shen Yuan hums. He’s quite happy about it. No matter what the boy says or does, he always seems to bring out the best in everyone. He doesn’t know if it’s because of his cute little face, his obvious shyness around people, or the way he clings to both Shen Yuan’s hand and legs when a woman approaches him to talk like an adorable clingy child. “He deserves good friends.”

“Doesn’t he have any friends at school either?” Li Xiaofeng asks. She sounds genuinely curious. “That really surprises me. He’s such a nice boy, and so cute. He always dresses so well too. I’m surprised all the kids don’t immediately want to be his friend.”

Shen Yuan sighs.

“Right now, he's homeschooled,” he explains, trying not to sound like he's making it all up right now. “He lived in the country for a long time; this is his first time living in the city. He just moved in with me, actually. We're… in the process of readjusting.”

“Wow,” Li Xiaofeng said, looking a little shocked. “That’s… wow. I didn’t expect that, I’m so sorry. What about his mother?”

Shen Yuan grimaces.

“Very far,” he says, shrugging. He honestly doesn’t know how much more detail to give. Probably the more vague he is, the easier it will be for Li Xiaofeng to make up her own story, and for that story to be melodramatic and scandalous enough that he won’t ask too many questions about it. “For now, it’s just Chengle and me.”

“That’s… brave of you,” Li Xiaofeng says, and Shen Yuan bites the inside of his cheek. Well, fuck, he supposes saying that *has* had some effect. “Taking care of him for yourself. Not many mans would do that. I mean, it’s normal for women to do it—God knows my ex-husband is more of a nuisance than a help, and he doesn’t even provide enough child support—but it’s hardly normal for a man to have the guts to take charge.”

“Yes, of course,” Shen Yuan sighs. Ah, he guesses he’s become a divorced single father now, at best. Anything to avoid having to answer questions about things he has no idea about.

His phone keeps vibrating. He turns the screen back on, only to find that Airplane has continued sending him messages. Seriously, is he just *lonely*? What's wrong with him?

ShangHH: come on bro you can't tell me it's not funny

ShangHH: you are the number 1 driving force behind the castration of the scum villain

ShangHH: and look at you bro you are a SHEN

ShangHH: any kind of castration fetish you want to share with the group??

ShenY: Seriously fuck you. I'm regretting answering your messages.

ShangHH: AWWW BRO

ShangHH: you hurt my feelings

ShenY: And you hurt my brain. We're even.

Loud, overly loud laughter makes Shen Yuan raise his head. Someone apparently kicked the ball into some tree branches, and several of the children are jumping around, kicking the tree, or using branches to try to get it down.

Just seeing Chengle too close to the tree, Shen Yuan is already feeling cold sweat.

“Chengle!” he calls. The boy has one foot planted in the tree and probably every intention of climbing. “Don’t you *dare* climb that tree!”

“But!” the boy pouts. Shen Yuan drops his backpack on the bench next to Li Xiaofeng, who laughs as Shen Yuan hobbles with his cane to where the children are playing. “I can do it!!”

“Just because you can doesn’t mean you *should*,” he says. He holds onto the tree and uses his own cane to tap the branches until he gets the ball to roll a little further down, where he can tap it with the cane and allow it to fall to the ground. “You could have fallen out of the tree, and that would have been dangerous. I don’t want anything bad to happen to you, okay?”

Luo Chengle pouts, but nods. He moves away from the tree and kicks the ball to the other children, who celebrate.

“Thanks, Cheng-ge’s dad!” Yanshi squeals, clapping. The other children also celebrate. There’s a loud chorus of ‘thanks to Cheng-ge’s dad’, and peals of laughter about how great a cane would be to get things down from high places while the children continue chasing the ball.

Luo Chengle does not go with them.

“Don’t you want to go play with your friends?” he asks, curious. Luo Chengle has that kind of strange, complicated look on his face, and Shen Yuan sighs as he pats his head, letting him think.

“They called you my dad,” he says in a very low voice. Shen Yuan is startled by the strange fragility of his words. “They think you’re my dad. But you’re not. You’re my Yuan-ge.”

“That’s true,” Shen Yuan hums. It burns, for some reason he can’t quite put his finger on. It’s not a pleasant feeling, but he also can’t quite put his finger on what he’s feeling.

“I wish you were,” Luo Chengle says, and Shen Yuan looks at him with the same sour, strange feeling creeping up his throat. The boy looks at the ground. “If you were my dad, I could live with you *forever*. And I could have lots of friends who aren’t mean to me. And I’d never have to train with swords again. And I’d never have to see Father Emperor be evil and make others bleed.”

Shen Yuan sighs. With all the pain in his soul (and his muscles, and his bones), he crouches in front of Chengle. His eyes are distant, evasive, but they seem watery, as if he's ready to cry.

“If I had a son, it would definitely be you,” he says. Chengle sips a little. “You’re smart, and sweet, and *kind*. I don’t need to be your dad to love you like the sweet boy you are, okay?”

Luo Chengle nods. Shen Yuan almost loses his balance when the boy throws himself at him so tightly it genuinely hurts. He hugs him with the hand that isn't holding his cane, carefully and tightly.

“I don’t want to leave,” he complains. “I like it here. I like with you. Yuan-ge is a better dad than Father Emperor.”

Shen Yuan swallows the horrible lump in his throat. It burns between his teeth, it stings his face. He pats his little head and kisses his forehead. Poor boy. He... he's really grown very fond of him. How could he not adore him, after all? No matter whose child he is, he's a sweet little bun who's slowly opening his heart to the kindness and sensitivity of the world.

“Your dad hasn’t come yet,” he says, and pinches Chengle’s cheek a little. “I don’t know when he’ll come, but what if I go with you when he does? I don’t know if I can always be there in your home,” and he grimaces at that. He doesn’t really know what he’s promising, but if there was a way to open a portal, *there’s surely* a way for them to enter and exit from one world to another. “That way you won’t be alone, and I can take care of you in your home.”

Chengle looks at him as if Shen Yuan is offering him the moon and stars.

“Would Yuan-ge do that for me?”

“Sure,” Shen Yuan shrugged. He slowly freed himself from Chengle’s embrace and stood up. Yeah, he’ll have to take more painkillers. It genuinely hurts too much; the cold, wet weather doesn’t help at all. “Now, go play with those little friends of yours. Later we’ll go get some dumplings. How about that?”

“Yes!” Chengle nods. He hugs Shen Yuan’s legs again, much happier, before running off with the other children. They greet him with smiles, kicking the ball his way, letting him kick it and joining in their fast-paced game, happy, as if Chengle belongs there among them.

With a strange wobbly feeling in his stomach, Shen Yuan isn't sure he can imagine Chengle being happy anywhere else.

He… isn't quite sure what to do with that.

⋆ ⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆ ⋆

ShenY: Do you want lunch? I'm paying.

ShenY: [location]

ShangHH: bro what

ShangHH: it's an hour by subway from my apartment

ShenY: How much on Didi?

ShangHH: ??? bold of you to assume I CAN afford a car

ShangHH: but like 25 minutes with little traffic

ShenY: Give me your address.

ShangHH: eh

ShangHH: [location]

ShenY: A car will pick you up in 8 minutes.

ShenY: [screenshot]

ShenY: Car and driver information.

ShangHH: ?????

ShenY: ?

ShangHH: is this some kind of sugardaddism?

ShenY: Fuck you.

ShangHH: yea bro that's exactly what i was afraid of

Airplane isn't much older than him, even if he looks more tired – and it's Shen Yuan who has spontaneously become a 24/7 babysitter. As his profile pic indicates, he's a chubby-faced, badly groomed boy with thick glasses. Shen Yuan is grateful for the switch from glasses to contact lenses, even though it hasn't been pleasant when he'd forget to take them off while sleeping or fall asleep at his desk.

It's clear his clothes are secondhand, or *even* thirdhand. They aren't battered to the point of being patched, but the colors are faded and worn, with frayed edges here and there. Shen Yuan is pretty sure he's seen better things in donations for rural families in times of crisis.

The hostess looks him up and down, clearly judging him. Airplane shifts uncomfortably, and Shen Yuan is about to intervene when Airplane repeats and insists, presumably, on the reservation Shen Yuan made in his name, going so far as to show the woman the crashed screen of his phone. She resigns herself and leads him away.

Shen Yuan waves his hand for Airplane to see. He's in a fairly secluded area with comfortable armchairs and a table with enough room for four. In the distance, Airplane seems to be falling apart more with every step he takes, as if he can't believe what he's experiencing.

“Bro,” he hisses as he drops into the seat opposite Shen Yuan. He relaxes awkwardly and almost sprawls, seemingly unused to being away from home, as soon as the hostess leaves. “According to Baidu, eating at this place costs *more* than a month’s rent on my crappy apartment. What do you do for a living?”

"You don't care," he says, because it's better to keep the mystery than simply saying he doesn't work and that his parents simply made him a shareholder, and he has a monthly salary without even lifting a finger. "Clean yourself up," he orders, throwing the bottle of sanitizer across the table.

Airplane does so. He drops the sanitizer on his hands and does all the work of wiping it off his palms and fingers. Shen Yuan also hands him a stack of disinfectant wipes, and Airplane uses one to wipe his own hands a second time and carefully cleans the sanitizer bottle before handing it back to Shen Yuan.

“Do you have OCD or something?” Airplane asks, noting that the table itself also looks damp. Shen Yuan has, of course, been cleaning the place a bit obsessively like always, even if he trusts the restaurant’s cleanliness standards are quite good.

“I take immunosuppressants, among other things,” Shen Yuan shrugs. Airplane grimaces. “It’s not easy to go out,” he says, although he’s sure he’s been leaving the house more in the last few weeks than he has in the last few… years.

"I can picture," Airplane seems about to say something. They're both interrupted by the waitress, who arrives to set the menu for them.

Shen Yuan lets Airplane watch with a bewildered expression. Meanwhile, he scans the kids' menu for options he might like and find tasty—he's pretty sure he can't give Chengle raw sushi, though he doesn't think being a little Heavenly Demon would give him a stomach bug. But it's not like he can eat sashimi or any kind of raw fish himself, either, lest he get a damn bacterial contamination.

“There aren’t even prices,” Airplane stammers. There’s an expression Shen Yuan can only describe as morbid horror on his face. “The only sushi I’ve ever eaten is the cheap supermarket kind. And it tasted like cardboard and vinegar. And it left me hungry.”

Shen Yuan twists a smile.

“Well, that's a shame,” he says. He's never tried cheap supermarket sushi. Neither he nor his questionable eating habits are *that* masochistic. “Go to the American section. You'll love all that shit with tempura, cream cheese, and frying.”

Airplane wisely obeys. Shen Yuan hands him a notebook where Airplane jots down the ones that caught his eye, rolling his eyes at the tempura and americanos. When the waitress comes to take their order, Shen Yuan repeats what Airplane jotted down, adding his own order of unagi nigiri and kappa maki, and tamago nigiri with inarizushi for Chengle. He adds a bowl of beef udon, a big portion of gyoza to share, and three bowls of rice, plus iced tea for everyone.

“That’s a damn lot of expensive food,” Airplane gasps as the waitress leaves. “*Three* bowls of rice? Are we waiting for anyone else?”

Shen Yuan sighs.

“There’s someone *you need* to meet,” he says, grimacing. He’d been debating internally for a while whether or not to tell him. Shen Yuan is pretty sure that if Airplane were a normal person, fuck it, of course he wouldn’t believe a thing he said. But fuck that. Airplane wasn’t a normal person; here was the jerk, accepting a lunch invitation from someone who had verbally butchered every one of his chapters and with whom he’d only been speaking virtually for a day and a half. Of course he was going to *believe* him. “And you’re going to think I’m crazy. I’m hoping I can bribe you enough with the food to make you stay.”

“Of course,” says Airplane, with a dumbfounded expression. “Uh, eh, about the chapters…”

Airplane abruptly cuts off his words when the waitress returns. She brings them iced teas and small cups of matcha tea, taking them down from her tray. She leaves a bowl of glazed edamame and small plates of pickles, which she places on the table with artful, practiced precision. Shen Yuan thanks her, and she leaves.

“I don’t *hate* your novel,” Shen Yuan says, taking his own chopsticks out of his bag. He has the childish teddy bear chopsticks he bought for Chengle, but he still puts them in his bag. “I hate the way you sell yourself short and write cheap papapa scenes when you could be fleshing out all the damn plot holes you have lying around. Also, what the hell is with *that* ending? It’s the worst, most mediocre excuse for writing I’ve ever read from you.”

Airplane lets out a whimper. He sounds like a beaten dog.

“If I had any doubts about you being the infamous Peerless Cucumber, you just cleared your image completely,” Airplane complains. He rubs at the side of his forehead, leaning his elbow carelessly on the table. “I mean, bro, honestly. I know it’s not the *greatest* novel in the world. But I like writing it. And I like making money from it. Can you blame me? It keeps me alive, metaphorically and literally.”

“Yes, I certainly do.” Shen Yuan looks at his clothes. He doesn’t judge people, but he figures the profits can’t leave him with much. “How many years have you had that hoodie? Does it even keep you warm?”

“Hey,” Airplane protests, wrinkling his nose. “Don’t mess with my clothes. They are old but functional.”

“I’ll buy you a better hoodie,” Shen Yuan points at him with his chopsticks. “Proper heating in your apartment. Decent clothes. Decent *food*. Those things you haven’t been able to buy because you’ve been surviving on tips and PIDW chapter sales.”

Airplane is speechless.

“You’re not going to ask me for sexual favors for that, are you?”

Shen Yuan throws the bottle of sanitizing at Airplane's head almost so automatically that he has trouble keeping up with his own movements. Airplane doesn't manage to dodge it in time, also surprised; Shen Yuan isn't entirely sure how red his face is, but at least a lot, given how much it stings. Fuck! He's not *that* weird!

“Ouch, ouch,” Airplane groans, rubbing where the bottle had hit. “There, there. I got it.”

“We’re in a public, family-friendly place. Behave yourself,” Shen Yuan points out, gesturing to the other people. They haven’t spoken so loudly as to be a nuisance, but even so, he supposes it would be uncomfortable for any of those families eating to hear such vulgar and indecent comments. This is a family-friendly place, and it’s open to everyone!

“Okay, okay, I understand,” Airplane continues to rub the bruise. He picks up the bottle and returns it to the table, while removing some disposable toothpicks from their packaging where the waitress had placed them. “So, are these like, free samples?”

“You eat,” Shen Yuan clicks his tongue. Airplane pecks at the pickles and makes various faces at the flavors. He seems to like radishes. Shen Yuan opts for the glazed edamame; it’s not his favorite, but honestly, he hadn’t eaten any sushi or any other variety since the last time his sister took him out, the day she accompanied him to get his blood drawn for his medical tests almost four months ago.

Airplane keeps looking up every few bites, looking dumb and curious. When Shen Yuan sees that he's almost bouncing in his seat, he sighs and says:

“I’ll help you. In return, I’ll need your help.”

“Huh? Sure, whatever you want, really,” Airplane shrugs. “I don’t have any money, but if you need me to write, uh, anything, fine. Here’s your trusty Airplane for that. I’ve got experience writing for money.”

“Yes, I know,” Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Of course, it’s the one Airplane could boast about, of all things. “More than writing, I need to know things. About PIDW.”

“What do you mean? I don’t understand,” Airplane gestures. Shen Yuan feels only a little sorry for him and how lost he looks. “Is this all for the extra chapters and lore?”

“They would be useful to me,” Shen Yuan says. He picks at one of the pickled cucumbers, smiling at the silly irony. “And it would also be useful to know other things you haven’t gotten around to developing in the main story.”

“I’m already lost,” Airplane confesses.

At the same moment, the waitress approaches. Her tray is larger, and Shen Yuan helps by moving things to the side so she can arrange the plates. Airplane gapes at everything on the table, from the sesame-seeded rice to the various sushi options.

Only when all the dishes are served and the waitress has left after wishing them a good lunch does Shen Yuan pick up his cane and stand up. As lately, his muscles creak in pain, making

him clench his jaw tightly. He's never been particularly active, but being on the move so much lately has clearly taken its toll. His joints burn, and, standing up, he has to take a deep breath to keep from complaining out loud.

“Bro, are you okay?” Airplane hisses. He looks like he’s about to jump off the table. “Uh. You need to… Uh, I don’t want to be like, ableist, but, uh, can I help you?”

“Stay here and don’t cross-contaminate my damn plate,” he orders sharply. Airplane nods quickly. Shen Yuan takes a couple of steps, and only when he moves does the pain become more bearable. Standing up, tensing and straining his muscles from rest, is the most painful thing ever. “I have to go find someone.”

Shen Yuan leaves Airplane behind. The best thing about family restaurants is, of course, their children's section. Shen Yuan shows the friendly woman at the entrance to the play area the pass on Chengle's wrist to allow him in, and yet he stays just behind the soft carpet on the floor. There are several children running around, climbing up and down on rides, some coloring. The youngest toddlers are playing with a nanny who seems to be telling them a story with puppets.

“Chengle?” he calls, without seeing him.

From inside the ball pit, Chengle comes out, bouncing a bunch of balls around him.

“Yuan-ge!” And the boy bursts out of the bouncy ball pit, splashing through plastic balls of different shades of blue and light blue that swish around him with loud clicks. He comes out, almost tripping over his feet, and runs to where Shen Yuan is standing, excited and happy. “Ball pit! I could swim! I can’t swim. But now I can! I didn’t drown!”

“Well done,” Shen Yuan clutches his cane, ready for the boy to come and hug his legs, patting him on the head. He’s only a little disheveled, and doesn’t seem too agitated to need to fix his hair or wipe the sweat off his face. Still, Shen Yuan gives him the small bottle of sanitizer which Chengle accepts, already accustomed to taking care of his hands to take care of his Yuan-ge. “Come on, come on. Our guest and the food have arrived.”

Chengle pouts.

“I don’t like him,” he says, but obeys, going to get his sneakers. He uses the sanitizer after putting on his shoes and before taking Shen Yuan's free hand. And finally, Chengle waves to the nanny as they leave the play area, still pouting. “I don’t like him, I don’t like him.”

“You don't even know him,” Shen Yuan chides a little, only a little jokingly. Seriously, this kid…

“I don’t like him,” Chengle insists. “If he knows Father Emperor, I don’t like him. I hate him.”

“I know Luo Binghe,” Shen Yuan points out, poking the boy’s soft, round cheek with a finger. Chengle grimaces. “And you like me. Right?”

“Right,” Chengle agrees, almost reluctantly. “But Yuan-ge is different. Yuan-ge is my Yuan-ge.”

Shen Yuan laughs a little, humming. “We’ll see.”

They follow the path from the children’s area to their table. While their table is secluded, it's not private either: Shen Yuan can see Airplane, looking suspiciously at the various sushi dishes, apparently having already tried some rice from the way his bowl is half-eaten. He guesses he must be hungry.

Being a secluded space, not a private one, Shen Yuan can see the exact moment Airplane sees them. His face twists in utter astonishment. Shen Yuan can't really hurry his steps, so during the time it takes them to arrive, Airplane is looking between Shen Yuan and Chengle with a strange, confused expression of astonishment.

“Oh,” Airplane says when they arrive. “Hey. You have a son.”

“Yes,” Chengle says immediately, taking a seat. He already looks sulky. “Yuan-ge is my father. Chengle is Yuan-ge’s son, and only Yuan-ge’s. I don’t have another father. Just Yuan-ge.”

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. He pinches Chengle's cheek as he takes the seat next to him. The boy, of course, makes a face and tries to bite his fingers, but Shen Yuan has already dodged too far to do so quickly—and anyway, Chengle never seems to bite him hard, just like a puppy who has caught the flesh of his finger loosely between his teeth, with only a little smile of triumph on his mouth for doing so.

“Airplane, let me introduce you. This little boy here is Luo Chengle,” he says. And Airplane takes a few inches back in his seat, his eyes wide. There’s *something* flickering across his face, an expression that ranges from surprise to restrained horror. “He’s Luo Binghe’s son.”

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Airplane hisses.

“Language,” Shen Yuan scolds. Airplane’s mouth snaps shut, so abruptly that his teeth click together. “You won’t say such things in front of a child.”

“I’m smart enough to know not to use rude words,” Chengle mumbles, looking at his plate. There’s no mistrust, but curiosity. He assumes that even though the udon looks appetizing, the sushi is a little different from what Chengle has eaten before. “Rude words are for rude adults. And that’s wrong.”

“That’s true,” Shen Yuan says. He finally presses on the tense muscles in his legs, shivering a little in relief as he manages to stop the painful pressure on them, easing it little by little as he rubs them insistently with his knuckles. “Chengle is very smart. What a clever boy.”

Even sulking, Chengle smiles a little. His cheeks glow, rosy and pretty.

“Hey,” Airplane says, as eloquently as his own brain seems to allow at the moment. “Uh. Cucumber-bro. He, well. He can’t be Luo Binghe’s son because. You know. Luo Binghe

isn't…" His voice trails off. He seems to fight every word as he says it, his face going from confusion to horror. It's a strange, silly thing to watch. "Uh. I mean. I see the resemblance but. Uh. Bro, what the f…?"

"Language," Shen Yuan repeats. Airplane closes his mouth again. Then, with a sigh, Shen Yuan turns to Chengle. When he'd told him they were going to meet Airplane, he'd introduced him as someone who knew Luo Binghe and could help them if they needed anything they might only know or learn from Chengle's world, but they'd probably need to prove to him that he *really* was Luo Binghe's son. Chengle hadn't been keen, and only the promise of a waterless pool like a toy lake had convinced Chengle to give him a chance. "Chengle, sweetheart. Can you circulate your qi, like we practice at home?"

Luo Chengle lets out a sigh. He nods, closing his eyes. He clasps his little hands on the table.

Shen Yuan doesn't know if what he feels in the air, a strange sensation vibrating against his skin, is really the qi circulating in a world where there isn't supposed to be a natural flow of qi—or, if there were, it would be interrupted by the cement cage that is the big city. The secluded location of their table is, of course, secluded enough that when the small red mark on Chengle's forehead begins to glow, no one but them will be able to see it.

Airplane screams and immediately covers his mouth, his eyes wide and his face grimacing in horror.

"What the…?" He trails off before uttering another vulgarity. He clears his throat and takes a sip of iced tea. From his pale complexion and the way his hand is shaking, Shen Yuan guesses a little white alcohol wouldn't hurt, but he's not about to encourage Airplane to develop any vices. "Okay. *Okay*. I believe you. Oh my. What now?"

Shen Yuan pats Luo Chengle's little head, which stops him from circulating his qi. His smile is tender as the red zuiyin on his forehead slowly fades. While he's at it, Shen Yuan takes out the bear chopsticks, and Chengle smiles broadly, reaching for one of the tamago nigiri with a brightly curious expression. He looks absolutely delighted to taste it, stars shining in his eyes as the sweeter-than-salty flavor hits his palate.

Shen Yuan sighs, returning his attention to Airplane.

"He opened a portal with Xin Mo," he says. Chengle hums in agreement; under the table, the boy flails his tiny feet, which barely touch the floor. "He saw, well. You know *who* in Luo Binghe's dungeons. He got really scared and ran away."

Chengle nods. He continues chewing. When he's finished, he brings the small cup closer and makes a very unpleasant face when he tastes it, setting it aside with his wrinkled nose. Shen Yuan smiles a little; okay, no more matcha for Chengle.

"I see," Airplane said with a distant, somewhat absent look. "And he… is now with you."

"It's been two weeks already," Shen Yuan sighs. He rubs his forehead, a little. He doesn't regret devoting himself fully to Chengle, but it's true that nothing in his life could be more different. He doesn't have time for anything, and at the same time, it's as if nothing in his life

is *completely* his. He can't be doing anything without his mind automatically going to Chengle. It's even as if he's not in the right mood to read and rant like usual. "That's why I haven't been reading your chapters. He came exactly the day you posted the end chapter. I've stopped paying attention to PIDW since then because, well," he points to Chengle, who is now slurping udon with a look of wonder. "He takes up a lot of the time I used to spend doing nothing."

"Am I bothering Yuan-ge?" Chengle asks, looking at him curiously. Shen Yuan quickly shakes his head.

"Not at all, sweetheart," he hums, patting his head. "Taking care of you makes me completely happy. I'm just explaining to our friend why I haven't been paying attention to what he's writing like I used to."

"I see," Chengle says. He looks less sulky with some delicious food and pats at his disposal. "How does friend *Ai-plein* know Yuan-ge?"

Airplane probably looks like he's on the verge of collapse as his face contorts with cuteness, his eyes ridiculously bright and his face pink. Ah, Shen Yuan has to give him some credit. Chengle babbling in English is probably too adorable for anyone's poor heart.

"From the internet," Shen Yuan explains. He picks up one of his pieces of sushi with his chopsticks, grateful for the moment to eat. He *really* missed good sushi. "We both belong to an online community where knows about Luo Binghe."

"Uh-huh," Chengle said, giving Airplane a dirty look. "And they all hate him? Or are they priests like Yuan-ge?"

"Uh," Airplane gives Shen Yuan a strange look. Shen Yuan has an expression that seems to be *daring* him to ask. "Well. Some… don't like it that much. Others do. It's… varied."

"Good," Chengle nods. He goes back to slurping his udon noodles. "Father Emperor is *evil*. You shouldn't like him. He's rude and harsh, and he never plays with me or my siblings. He doesn't even spend time with Mother. And he does ugly and evil things like hurting other demons in the throne room, putting Mobei-bofu in charge of cleaning, and making other women leave their husbands and families to marry him. No one should like Father Emperor."

And Chengle slurps more noodles.

Airplane's gaze is hysterical on Shen Yuan. Shen Yuan continues to stare at him with one eyebrow raised, and even when Airplane opens his mouth to say something, he slowly, *wisely*, closes it. His expression is quite dismayed. He stuffs his mouth with a portion of his sushi to avoid replying, and seems surprised that it actually tastes good.

"Dip it with soy sauce next time," Shen Yuan instructs. Airplane nods, chewing with his cheeks as big as a hamster. "I hope it tastes better than supermarket sushi."

"*Better*," Airplane stammers around his mouth full, and Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” he scolds, pointing at Chengle. “Even the child has better manners than you. Behave yourself.”

Airplane nods, red-faced and somewhat embarrassed. He chews, swallows, and drinks more iced tea. When he seems a little more stable and less dazed, he finally says:

“Okay. Yes. I believe you. Uh, how can I help you?” He looks at Chengle, who’s clearly glowering at Shen Yuan while he eats. Shen Yuan supposes he’s got that same possessed porcelain doll look that used to unnerve him in the beginning, and he feels just a tiny bit of pity for Airplane. “I mean, you’re *clearly* doing well, huh.”

“Chengle is a growing boy, and, you know, I can’t neglect any aspect of who he is and what he needs,” he hums. Chengle slurps another noodle, splattering sauce all over himself. Shen Yuan isn’t even aware of when he reached for the napkin to wipe it off, only that he’s doing it. “So, Airplane, you’re going to tell me *everything* you know and need to know about Heavenly Demons. We don’t want Chengle to have any problems growing up with his heritage.”

Airplane looks like he's in a fever dream. His gaze wanders from the sushi to the chopsticks still in his hand, and finally he hunches his shoulders, nodding.

“I liked the sushi,” he says. “Especially since it doesn’t taste like cardboard with sea salt on it. But I don’t need expensive meals or anything like that, uh, just to pay the rent while I write something else that sells. Just that, and I’ll gather all my drafts since high school with everything I’ve, uh, *researched*.” His gaze lingers cautiously for a moment on Chengle. A wise choice of words, Shen Yuan approves. “I’ll have to take boxes out of my parents’ storage room, if they haven’t thrown everything out already. It’s in Shanghai, so it’ll *take a while.*”

“Take your time,” Shen Yuan shrugs. And then, on second thought, “Actually, since you’re going to Shanghai, have you ever been to Shanghai Disney? Chengle won’t be able to go on the rides alone, and it’s not like I can follow him on my own.” He points at his cane alludingly. “I’ll pay for your bullet train tickets, transportation in Shanghai, and lodging to get all those things if you accompany him on the rides he wants.”

Airplane squints. Then, as if he's truly lost his mind, he bursts out laughing.

“Cucumber-bro, you're crazy,” he says, completely amazed. “Of course I'm going to say yes. It's fucking Disney. What the fuck.”

“Language!” Chengle scolds, very sulkily, pointing at him with his chopsticks. His face is still splattered with noodle sauce. “Don’t be rude!”

Shen Yuan has to crush a hand against half his face, biting the inside of his cheek as his shoulders shake hysterically from laughter. Airplane's face flushes, embarrassment soaking his face.

“Well done,” Shen Yuan patted Chengle on the head. “What a good boy. So polite.”

Chengle gives Shen Yuan the widest smile, toothy, sauce-stained, and with tender crescent eyes. Shen Yuan can only feel his heart ignite there in his chest, unable to feel anything but love and absolute devotion for that little boy.

Ah, really… Shen Yuan never saw himself as a father. Not that his health or normal lifespan would allow it, and anyway, where would he meet someone to start a family with? Not that his parents haven't tried to introduce him to some cute daughter of their business partners, but to be honest, Shen Yuan didn't want to ruin their lives: he's fully aware of his own problems, his difficulties, and his inability to have a normal life thanks to all of it. Marrying someone just… would be becoming a horrible burden in someone else's life who not only didn't deserve it but probably didn't even want any of it.

Raising children was something he'd completely ruled out. A responsibility bigger than him.

Chengle, like a huge and terrifying tsunami, had struck and collapsed every single barrier. He hadn't even had time to hesitate or make any choice; taking care of the child had been practically a natural instinct, and now, even with how difficult his life had become, Shen Yuan has the absolute feeling that he would rather live with daily obstacles and difficulties, with pain piercing him from the wear and tear, than live without Chengle.

Shen Yuan has no idea when Luo Binghe will come for Chengle—if he comes for his son, a hateful part of his mind says—but when he does, Shen Yuan will *somehow manage* to keep Chengle in his life. He doesn't know how, and he doesn't even want to get ahead of himself, but he just knows that even if he hasn't been living with Chengle for a long time and a whole life without him, he can't go one more day without that child lighting up all his days.

Ah. He guesses that it’s almost like a father should feel after all.

Chapter End Notes

SY: I'll pay whatever, just stop selling your fucking soul by writing that papapa extras shit
Airplane: ... I'm being sugarbabified?

PLATONIC CUMPLANE MAKING ME HAPPY HEHEHEHE lol this is the longest chapter I've written so far for this fic

Poor park-mom, she has no idea that flirting with Shen Yuan is simply pointless, sorry darling, your dreams of landing a new rich husband who's also a good father will remain just that: dreams
I firmly believe that Shen Yuan has such a low self-perception that he doesn't even appreciate how IMPORTANT his insane comments and contributions must be to the PIDW fandom. He definitely has a not-so-small group of fans waiting for his comments because they find it even more entertaining than the chapters themselves :D

Ah, Shen Yuan dealing with the travails of poor health, poor, sad boy - anyway, I mean, yes, I did a little research on what he's got, but since I'm not a doctor and don't have any medical issues other than my own fibromyalgia + insomnia + migraines (not to mention my psychological issues here), I won't go into the medical's name or any more than vague mentions of his medications and/or treatments. However!! I think I can answer it in a comment if you want to know what direction I'm going with his health :D

I miss eating good sushi, guys I hope I didn't make you hungry LOL Thanks so much for reading!!! I hope you enjoyed the chapter a lot!! You know, comments, kudos, interactions, I really appreciate all of that, and feel free to do any of them!!! You make me SO happy and I love being on this crazy journey with you all HEHEHEHE
Again thank you so SO MUCH for reading, see you soon!!!

Chapter 5: Monday and Tuesday of the third week

Chapter Notes

> YES, HERE I AM AGAIN, SAY HEY TO YOUR TRUSTED CLOWN. FIVE DAYS ON A ROCK, DING DING DING, I LOVE YOU ALL, THANK YOU ALL FOR READING AND GIVING ME ATTENTION, HUGS AND KISSES
> Btw seriously THANK YOU again you make me happy I am so happy THANK YOU
>
> Chapter warnings: Shen Yuan's internalized ableism, physical overexertion, physical therapy procedures :D
>
> Enjoy the chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Monday morning, they leave for the zoo. Shen Yuan puts on his best walking shoes with all the damn orthopedic support he detests and compression stockings, swaps the simple handle of his cane for the more ergonomic one, and sighs, with resignation and the feeling of humiliation he's carried all his life at having to use something as ridiculous as that to do something everyone can do without any assistance, and wraps his knees, legs, and lower back in the strongest muscle supports in his wardrobe. He's grateful for the cool weather: he's sure the loose clothing will cover everything up.

Chengle's preparations are more cheerful: a backpack with an extra sweater and socks, a lunchbox with chopped fruit and healthy sandwiches in case Chengle wants to snack and they're not near a place that sells something without so many additives, a small children's camera to take his own photos, and his little lilac water bottle filled with glow-in-the-dark stars. Also, Shen Yuan supposes, imitating him, Chengle packs his own disinfectant alcohol, sanitizer and his own wet wipes. Shen Yuan ties a braided bracelet with a contact QR code around his wrist in case Chengle ever gets lost or strays too far, so they can contact him immediately.

It never hurts to be cautious, right?

It's a rather pretty, though cool, day; there's sunshine, which makes the unfaded flowers look bright. Shen Yuan also thinks it's a pretty good day for his muscles—or perhaps he's taken just the right amount of pills to avoid any discomfort.

Just looking at the entrance map, Shen Yuan lets out a resigned sigh.

“Chengle,” he says. The boy looks up at him, his expression beaming. He’s almost jumping with excitement with every little step. “Even though I feel good today, I know I won’t be able to walk the entire zoo. So, how about you choose what to see now and we’ll see that today? We can come back another day to see what we missed, okay?”

Chengle doesn't pout or sulk like Shen Yuan had expected. He nods quickly, his hand twining with Shen Yuan's free one as they both look at the map. Luo Chengle has decided he wants to see the monkeys and the elephants—and his having seen Aladdin, as part of Shen Yuan's plan to educate the boy on Disney classics for a complete experience when they go to Disney Shanghai, also will probably influence his decision—so the route from the north gate takes them straight to the elephants.

Shen Yuan decides that, crossing the bridge, they can stop by the lion and tiger area (maybe see the kangaroos while they're at it), say hello to the mandrills, pandas, and red pandas (with luck and if all is well with his muscles, make a detour to see the lemurs, fennec foxes, and peacocks, taking a look in the gift shop and a visit to the restrooms), and going along the lake with all the ducks, they can see the aviary, the flamingos, and the cranes before seeing all the monkeys. He's sure they can close with the penguins and otters, then eat and after Shen Yuan has a well-deserved rest, they can leave.

Luo Chengle agrees. Shen Yuan is grateful for the off-season: there really aren't many people, so he can afford to let Chengle scamper ahead of him, straying and staring at everything with astonished eyes.

The elephants are their first stop; Luo Chengle gasps in amazement, taking tons of photos with his tiny pink camera, squealing and jumping when one of the enormous elephants moves its trunk in his direction. Shen Yuan lets Chengle peek into the aquarium a little, without pushing himself to go all the way around, and the boy runs off as soon as he realizes he's surrounded by water on all sides. He doesn't believe the glass isn't going to fall on him.

Shen Yuan assumes it's a very valid fear.

“Yuan-ge, Yuan-ge! Can I feed it?” Chengle asks when they reach the kangaroos’ open cage. Shen Yuan hums an assent, and Luo Chengle dangles his small camera around his neck, reaching for his food pouch. The kangaroo—and, really, all the animals they’ve seen so far, and there have been quite a few—seems drawn to Luo Chengle, approaching him with more curiosity than the few other children at the zoo on a Monday morning during the off-season.

“Do you see that strange shape on her belly?” Shen Yuan points out. Luo Chengle nods, his eyes wide and curious. “That’s where they keep their babies when they’re born. Their babies are born very, very early, and they have to grow there for a long time, so they receive nourishment and protection from their mothers.”

“Wow!” Chengle jumps up and down. “They protect their children! I like them!”

“I expected it,” Shen Yuan pats his head. Luo Chengle gives him a wide, bright smile.

Luo Chengle keeps taking lots of photos of everything around him. Shen Yuan had bought an exceptionally large memory card, expecting this; Luo Chengle doesn't seem to have had too much trouble adapting to small bursts of technology, but of course he expected him to take lots of pictures of everything. Chengle even points the camera at him a few times, and Shen Yuan probably rolls his eyes at at least four or five of the pics.

Tigers and lions are wonderful.

“They’re HUGE!!” Luo Chengle squeals, jumping up and down, staring with wide eyes from the glass. Two imposing-looking white tigers are staring right at Shen Yuan and Chengle. Shen Yuan isn’t too pleased that all the animals are staring at him like he’s a potentially dangerous force of nature, but in puppy form. “I like them! Yuan-ge, Yuan-ge, I want one!”

“Pfff,” Shen Yuan lets out a low laugh. A real tiger? No, no way. He’s not even sure he’d accept a cat in his apartment. His lungs would go fucking crazy. “Maybe I can get you a stuffed one. Much less dangerous.”

“But a real one!” the boy jumps up and down, his eyes filled with wonder. “I’ll comb and care for it! And, and!! It can sleep with me! And we’ll play together!”

“It’s very dangerous,” Shen Yuan hums. Chengle pouts, but still has joy in his eyes as he retrieves his camera and begins taking pictures of one of the tigers, which has now moved, walking toward the two of them. “Look at the size of its paw. It’s bigger than your head, sweetie.”

“I know! It’s awesome!”

Shen Yuan, despite everything, can't wipe the smile off his face. He takes many photos of Chengle with the tigers on his back.

“It’s awesome,” he also admits, because it is. Nature is fascinating in all its aspects; so many species with such different adaptability, creating shapes, sizes, and appearances so distant from one another yet so similar to survive in their own native habitats. “But it’s still very dangerous for you. But if you still want it, we’ll order a very, very large stuffed tiger so you can sleep with it.”

“Bigger than Totoro?”

“Even bigger.”

Luo Chengle seems satisfied with that. They continue. The lions also make their act of wanting to approach Chengle with clearly hostile intentions, and it is the lioness who comes closest, growling and baring her sharp fangs as if trying to scare him off. Of course, Chengle is not scared: he takes a bunch of photos, shrieks, and Shen Yuan calmly explains that in the wild, female lions are the ones who hunt to feed their young. Luo Chengle, of course, already *loves* them. He tells the lioness what a good mom she is and smiles dazzlingly at her, and Shen Yuan takes several photos with his own phone of a very excited Chengle saying all kinds of nice things to a lioness with an expression that seems ready to eat him.

He's more than ever grateful that no animal can break the glass. He would have been truly worried if it were any other situation.

They notice some of the same kind of ducks that had chased them near the lake in that park just before they continued down. Chengle squeals excitedly at the fennec fox, insisting again that he wants one—and honestly, even Shen Yuan finds it pretty adorable, even if it would probably be illegal to have a damn fennec fox in his apartment. They greet the lemurs, and

when they approach the peacocks a little further on, at least two of the three fan out their pompous tails, probably in something more violent than flirtatious.

Shen Yuan takes the opportunity to take photos while Chengle, excited, tries to throw them some food and encourages them to come closer. They, of course, maintain a safe distance from what they surely smell like a larger predator. Shen Yuan can only be moved and amazed in equal measure.

They haven't even gotten a good look at the pandas before Shen Yuan feels he needs a break. He stays on a bench for a moment, breathing only slightly with difficulty from the overexertion of his muscles. He can feel a sensation of cold sweat on his neck, a strange burning rising from the pit of his stomach to his throat from the damned acid reflux caused by the medicine. Ah, he's really messing up, isn't he?

Then Luo Chengle squeals in wonder, saying, “YUAN-GE, YUAN-GE! THAT MONKEY IS SO UGLY!!” and Shen Yuan stands up, clenching his jaw to hold back the tears in his eyes, and rushes as fast as he can to where Luo Chengle is taking pictures of a baboon who is looking at them with a sour face.

Then, the pandas are beautiful. Shen Yuan talks to it, reading the signs about their conservation and how endangered they are, and explaining what it means for an animal to be endangered. Luo Chengle comes to the final conclusion that humans are very fool—except for Yuan-ge, of course—and Shen Yuan agrees. The panda chews on bamboo, and when Luo Chengle waves at it, telling it that it is very strong for living a long time even though it doesn't have a home and fool humans destroy everything, the panda looks at him with a face that almost seems confused.

Red pandas are adorable. Shen Yuan plopped down on the first bench he found, unleashing Luo Chengle into the gift shop. He warned him that he wouldn't be able to carry his own things, so if he wanted anything, he'd have to ask for things that would fit in his backpack. Luo Chengle spent at least twenty minutes checking everything out, earning many laughs from the shop assistants who offered Shen Yuan some water while he waited.

Shen Yuan guesses he must really be pale and sweaty. He agrees, and takes another painkiller —it's a small emergency dose, so he should be fine for now.

Luo Chengle decides on a tiger-ear tiara, a monkey plushie that can hang on his backpack, a panda plushie holding a bamboo stick, animal coloring books, and more tiger stuff, other plushies, a keychain, a backpack charm, a hat with tiger ears. Shen Yuan doesn’t bother standing: he gives Chengle his phone to take to the clerk to pay, enjoying every moment he can sitting down, and when the boy gets his things, Shen Yuan watches him with a crooked smile for five whole minutes, trying to get everything to fit into his little backpack. Surprisingly, it all fits, even though Shen Yuan has to tie Chengle’s extra sweater around his waist to make room, with the exception of the tiger-ear tiara that Shen Yuan puts on his cute little head.

“Now you’re a little tiger,” he hums proudly.

“RAWR!” Luo Chengle shrieks, and Shen Yuan feels his heart laughing as he pulls him into a hug, shaking with laughter.

After the painkiller, things get a little easier. Luo Chengle marvels at the flamingos, though his wonder is tinged with caution.

“Are they poisonous?” he asks in a low voice. Shen Yuan shakes his head. “It’s just that they’re such a bright color! Mother said that brightly colored animals are poisonous, just like flowers. Especially the pink ones. They give a high fever, and Chengle should never-ever go near them.”

Shen Yuan has a rough idea of what kind of animals and flowers Liu Mingyan is referring to. He explains to Luo Chengle that flamingos are actually born with white chick feathers, and that it's thanks to their diet that their feathers become increasingly pink. Since they live in watery areas and feed on algae and crustaceans, they also ingest something called carotenoids, a coloring pigment found in certain algae and small animals. So, as they grow, their diet makes them increasingly pink.

“So if I eat seaweed, my hair will turn pink?!” Luo Chengle asks, squealing. There’s a small family laughing in the distance, clearly moved by the little boy hopping like a bunny with all those bouncing curls.

Shen Yuan pats his head.

“Nope,” he says, and Luo Chengle makes a huge face of disappointment. “Carotenoids work differently in humans. We can’t make parts of our bodies pink like flamingos. They’re much more powerful than us.”

“Oww,” Chengle pouts. “But I saw those girls with pink hair. On the street! So long and pink!”

“That’s because they dyed it that way, as if they used makeup to make their skin shiny or their nails colored,” Shen Yuan explains. Luo Chengle looks much more disappointed by this, shuffling past until he reaches the parrots right next door, when his excitement at the sight of the parrots and toucans returns completely.

Cranes and other birds later, both take a seat before the monkeys so that Luo Chengle can eat some chopped fruit and a sprinkle cookie, Shen Yuan can drink some water and press his knuckles against the tightest tension in his aching muscles.

“Is Yuan-ge in a lot of pain?” Chengle asks. His little eyes shine with concern. “If Yuan-ge hurts, it’s ugly. I don’t like it.”

“I’ll be fine,” Shen Yuan promises, sighing. He’ll really need to take a long week off if he wants to walk through at least half of damn Shanghai Disneyland. “There’s not much left, anyway. Then we’ll get something to eat when we’re home. A nice hot bath will do me good.”

The hot water *should* do him good, anyway. Also more medicine, pain cream, and a good antacid. Luo Chengle nods, still pouting. Shen Yuan finds himself nearly thrown onto the bench when Luo Chengle hugs him.

“Father Emperor heals with his special blood,” he says, his low voice serious. “If he were older, he would have taught me how. Then Yuan-ge would never feel pain.”

Shen Yuan swallows the lump in his throat. Oh, really, he's in that much pain? It's nothing he can't handle. He's always been able to handle it. He shouldn't be so weak that the pain is so close to making him cry like this.

“You don’t have to worry,” he hums, and places a soft, small kiss on the boy’s forehead. Chengle squeezes further into his embrace, and the pressure hurts for a moment, but right after, he eases a tug on the middle of his back. It’s a welcome and surprising relief. “Really, honey. It’s not your responsibility, okay?”

Luo Chengle continues pouting. It takes him a moment to see a couple of monkeys regain his energy, continuing to take photos in fascination, his hands braced against the glass. Some of the monkeys move away, elusive. Others respond, clasping hands back. One particularly large gorilla begins to rock in what Shen Yuan can detect as an aggressive attempt to command standing and respect, but Luo Chengle jumps up and down excitedly, waving at it as if receiving a nod from it as well.

It's a lot of monkeys to get to the official end of the walk. Shen Yuan can barely feel his feet; his knees are burning, his muscles are pathetically smouldering. There's cold sweat on his forehead, down his neck, and sliding down his back, and a very unpleasant feeling of nausea from exhaustion. Every step is a ruin and a blow to his self-esteem. But they finally arrive and see the penguins splashing, diving, swimming back and forth as if they were flying underwater. Shen Yuan gives a vague explanation about them—it probably would have been more detailed if he weren't almost delirious with pain—and when they look at the otters, Luo Chengle finds them precious and adorable.

Shen Yuan strongly agrees. He also completely agrees that the zoo food isn't the best or the healthiest, but he's not going to complain when they finally sit down and order their hamburgers. It's after noon, they've been walking for almost six hours, and Shen Yuan could genuinely cry with relief at not having to walk any further than necessary. He's pushed himself too hard, and he's sure his muscles are going to be bitterly reproaching him for the next few days.

He eats without being too hungry, just to have something in his stomach to take his midday meds. Iced tea is much more welcome.

Chengle doesn't stop talking for a minute. Shen Yuan listens to every word: how much he liked the tigers, how cute and huggable the pandas look, how lovely everything was, that the stone statues were so big, how lucky the ducks didn't chase them this time. He eats and dangles his little feet in the air, and Shen Yuan isn't at all surprised when, on the car ride home, Chengle's silence means the boy literally fell asleep on his shoulder.

He sends several of the best photos directly to his family group; he chooses the most adorable ones, especially those in which Chengle is wearing his tiger-ear tiara. His mother reacts with hearts to all of them and says she's very excited to meet the little one at Sunday dinner.

Shen Yuan soon has at least twenty messages from his Da-ge asking where he stole the child from and why his mother seems to approve of his child kidnapping. Shen Yuan enjoys telling him that if he would settle down as an older brother, stop being such an obsessive martial arts trainer in his spare time, and give his mother a grandchild, she *might probably* object if Shen Yuan decides to kidnap a child and present him as a grandson to fill the void left by Da-ge.

If Ming-ge sends him a string of swear words, threatens to forcibly visit him and force the truth out of him, and keeps demanding that Shen Yuan tell him where he stole that child from and why everyone is acting like it's okay, wanting to know if Jiu-ge is so blatant as to support this and who else is involved, Shen Yuan just mutes his chat. He strokes Chengle's slightly disheveled little head with his fingers, sighing.

He has a tough week ahead of him.

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Shen Yuan can't even get out of bed the next day.

“I’m sorry,” he says to Chengle, when the boy is on the verge of tears, clearly frightened by the stifled scream Shen Yuan gave when he woke up and tried to stretch. He can move his arms, turn in bed, and even half-sit up. His legs are a thing of their own—a shuddering static, a dull ache the only thing that reminds him they’re still attached to his body. He could literally *cry.* He hasn’t had a day *this* bad in years, not since he dropped out of college. “You don’t have to worry, okay, honey? It’s just a bed day today. I’ll call Ayi to heat up some food for you. How about we also call uncle Airplane to keep you company and play with you today?”

Luo Chengle sobs and complains, but eventually agrees when Shen Yuan insists that it's really very, very important to him that Chengle be okay all day and not worry about him. Ayi is busy and apologizes, but Shen Yuan assumed it anyway. He texts her that nothing's wrong. Sighing, he writes to his nurse with only a little embarrassment, and with less embarrassment, he writes to Airplane.

ShenY: I need you at my house as soon as you can. I'll pay you.

ShenY: [location]

ShangHH: wtf it's not even 8am who wakes up at this time

ShangHH: eh

ShangHH: it's not sexual right?

ShenY: Do you have some fucking sugar baby fetish, you moron?

ShenY: No. I can't move today and Chengle needs someone to heat his food, someone to play with and company for the day.

ShangHH: oh fuck

ShangHH: my cute little grandson needs his airplane-yeye

ShangHH: i have to finish a chapter but if it's okay if i take my laptop while watching a movie or taking a nap, i'll go

ShenY: As long as you come. And don't call him your grandson, for fuck's sake. It's disgusting.

The nurse arrives first. Shen Yuan sends Chengle to open the door, guilt burning in his chest; the boy is wrapped in his favorite cloud blanket and wearing Totoro pajamas. Shen Yuan guesses he must be really sick, because Luo Chengle doesn't even act out his typical jealousy, simply taking a seat in Shen Yuan's desk chair wrapped in his blanket and cuddling with one of the larger Totoro plushie. All of his new stuffed animals have been in the dryer since last night, after being washed and disinfected.

“Oh, it’s a *very* bad day,” the nurse says. She is an older woman who is known to his mother, so Shen Yuan knows that eventually his mother will find out about it, but it hardly bothers him in that circumstance. “Where did you keep your warm blanket, dear?”

Shen Yuan points to the drawer. She helps him move the covers and replace them with the electric blanket. The warmth is a genuine relief, and Shen Yuan covers his face with his hands, feeling a horrendous pressure of anguish in his throat. He's sure he's about to cry, and he recognizes the humiliation of feeling incapable of something as simple as walking normally like anyone else. It has beaten him forever, almost whipping him, a horrendous knowledge burning through him more than the pain.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of, dear,” the nurse hums in a kind voice. “It’s okay to ask for help when you need it.”

Still, Shen Yuan tries to swallow his tears of humiliation. When the nurse goes to search his medicine cabinet for the creams, Luo Chengle approaches with small steps and curls up beside him.

“Is this my fault?” he asks, his voice small and fragile. “Yuan-ge has to tell me the truth. I don’t want Yuan-ge to hurt because of me.”

“It’s not your fault,” Shen Yuan says, trying to make his voice as reassuring as possible. “Not really, baby. I promise. Nothing that happens to me will ever be your fault, okay? Do you trust me?”

“But Yuan-ge was in pain,” Chengle insists. His pout trembles, and his watery eyes break Shen Yuan’s heart. “Chengle didn’t know it hurt so much.”

Shen Yuan pulls Luo Chengle into his arms. That's all it takes for the child to start crying on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Chengle stammers, through tears. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry…”

“Hey, sweetie,” Shen Yuan brushes his hair very carefully. “Baby, I promise. I’m just sick. This happens to me a lot. It’s normal. I promise.”

“It’s *not* normal,” Chengle complains, rubbing his tearful face against Shen Yuan’s shoulder. “I don’t want it to be normal. I don’t like it.”

Shen Yuan sighs. He gently rocks him, soothing his cries as the ever-increasing warmth of the heating pad causes the pain, like fierce stings piercing every muscle in his legs, to slowly subside.

“I’ll be more careful from now on, okay?” Shen Yuan promises. He brushes Luo Chengle’s hair between his fingers, wipes the sweet boy’s tears with the soft sheets. “It’s just pain. It will pass. And we can play together and do more fun things.”

“I don’t need to do fun things,” Chengle complains, between hiccups. His face is red, and his sweet little eyes are swollen from crying. “I just need Yuan-ge.”

Shen Yuan opens his mouth, but finds he has nothing to say. He just pulls his sweet boy into another hug, holding him as tight as his arms can hold. And Chengle trembles in his embrace, and even though Shen Yuan holds him so tight that his arms ache with the effort, Chengle only seems to grow smaller in his grasp, wanting to sink down and hide there forever.

Honestly, Shen Yuan wants the same thing.

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Airplane arrives almost an hour and a half later. Shen Yuan supposes it makes sense—he didn't send him a car this time, too dazed by grief to think coherently, and Airplane's apartment, based on its location, really was in a remote area away from the center.

It's Luo Chengle who opens the door again. Shen Yuan doesn't hear what they say or what they're talking about, but they stay for quite a while while the nurse helps Shen Yuan after the first course of muscle relaxants takes effect. She puts the cream on his legs and presses on the tense spots until tears stream down his face—and Shen Yuan supposes there's no better time for Airplane to arrive, anyway.

They stay like that for a while. His nurse massages his stiff muscles, applies pressure to all the burning spots, and after a horrendous pain that literally makes him bite the sleeve of his pajamas to keep from screaming, the worse pain subsides. He can wiggle his toes, twist his knees, and raise his legs a few inches off the mattress.

The pain burns, even so. Shen Yuan hadn't expected anything else.

The nurse does everything medically recommended: hot compresses, warm water to keep him hydrated. Embarrassingly for Shen Yuan, she helps him eat a few spoonfuls of congee even

with his stomach closed so that the medication won't make his stomach hurt if he takes it on an empty stomach, and she makes a very sour face when Shen Yuan points out that the dosage he actually takes is usually double what the doctors recommend last year because his usual dose had stopped working. She suggests some antacids, and Shen Yuan supposes he should order some more—he's really been having quite a bit of heartburn and pain in his stomach and side lately.

The nurse leaves late in the morning to cover other schedules after helping Shen Yuan get to and from the bathroom. Just as she leaves, Airplane knocks on his bedroom door.

“Knock, knock,” he says, and then just stands there. His clothes are even worse, and the dark circles under his face are those of someone who clearly hasn’t had more than a couple of bad hours of sleep. “Uh. Your clingy boy’s all worried sick and tearful now. Although I made him have breakfast and, uh, sorry, I stole some of your breakfast. Uh. Is it safe for him to come to see you now? I mean, uh, are you better?”

“Better,” Shen Yuan murmurs, as proudly as he can from the bed, his face red and his eyes puffy from crying. He can twist his ankles, sit up, and tilt his knees. He’s not sure his aching legs can bear his weight right now, but it’s better progress than usual. It probably won’t take more than three or four days before he’s able to walk a bit again. Oh, he really *doesn’t want* to take Chengle to Disney in a wheelchair; everyone always gives those disgustingly pitying looks to people in wheelchairs. Maybe they really *should* postpone the travel. “Eat whatever you want, use whatever you want. Fuck, take some of my fucking clothes if you want to get comfy. In fact, you’d better change if you’re going to be on my shitty couches.”

“Language,” Chengle murmurs in a low voice, leaning out from behind Airplane. Shen Yuan sighs, feeling as if the heat in his chest is so great it could engulf him whole. “Yuan-ge isn’t rude.”

“Your Yuan-ge is rude sometimes,” Shen Yuan murmurs, “but never to you, sweetheart.”

Luo Chengle moves forward, slowly at first, and then literally at such a speed that Shen Yuan doesn't even register when Chengle is hugging him. The strength of the hug doesn't matter to him now.

“There, there,” he kisses his forehead, strokes his hair. His head is a tangle of curls trying to stay neat, fluffed up everywhere. “Did your uncle Airplane do your hair that badly? Tsk, how careless. And yet his hair looks just like yours. You’d think he knew how to define curls.”

“Hey!” Airplane protests. “Styling takes time and products I don’t have and don’t know how to use. At least I got his hair done.”

“It hurt,” Chengle says. He pouts, but it’s clearly fake, even though his sweet little eyes still look sad. Shen Yuan tries not to laugh. “Yuan-ge, *Ai-plein* pulled my hair badly. Hit him.”

“Hey!” and Airplane blanches. “That’s not fair! I apologized!”

They fiddle around for a bit, a bit of back-and-forth that Airplane seems to understand is only to make Luo Chengle stop looking so fragile and dismayed. Then Shen Yuan takes a seat

surrounded by pillows and blankets. Clearly reluctantly, Chengle retrieves the dakimakura of Luo Binghe (which, thankfully, is quite respectable and not at all unseemly) that Shen Yuan had hidden in his closet to help hold the other pillows steady and keep him sitting.

“So *this* is what he meant by you being a priest,” Airplane murmurs, snooping around the closet, among the action figures and all the hidden fanmade merchandise. Everything inside the closet, packed together in such a small space, really does look like a hidden altar. “Yeah, you're definitely a priest. Cucumber Priest.”

“If you touch anything else, I’ll cook your hand in hot sauce and make you *eat it*,” Shen Yuan threatens.

Luo Chengle looks at him with huge eyes, clearly surprised.

“Can Yuan-ge do that?”

“Only to your uncle Airplane,” Shen Yuan promises. He pats Luo Chengle on the head, who seems much more appeased. Shen Yuan sighs; yep, he won’t make any strange, violent threats in front of Chengle. The last thing he wants is to cause the boy *another* trauma, and God knows he’s already had enough for his young age.

“I guess I'm flattered,” Airplane murmurs, closing that closet door and peeking into the next one. He finally retrieves an extra blanket, which he carries to Shen Yuan's bed. “Uh. This one seems warmer and a little heavier. It'll do you good, I think?”

“Thanks,” Shen Yuan murmurs, sighing as he lets Airplane put the blanket over his aching legs. “What did you have for breakfast? Did you watch a movie?”

They both tell him about their morning – Airplane hadn't been able to get Luo Chengle to eat much, but they'd both had some congee and apples that Airplane had cut into bunnies for breakfast. Shen Yuan learns that Airplane had been the eldest of four little brothers from his mother's second marriage to a man with quite a bit of money – at least enough to pay for the alterations to pass them off as rural-born – so he'd learned to make some silly things for them, like teddy bear sandwiches, octopus sausages, and bunny apples. However, since he'd moved to Beijing and was basically on his own, there hadn't been any childcare, so he was a bit rusty.

He also learns that, despite Airplane’s family *having* money from his stepfather’s business dealings—not much, or even half of what the Shen family might be aware of, but enough to support the large family and a rather nice house not far from the modern center—he was actually completely kicked out and ignored the moment he turned eighteen and passed his gaokao. Airplane shrugs this off: it hadn’t been such a good exam after all, and his stepfather had been wanting to get rid of him for quite some time now; he just needed a suitable excuse so that his mother would allow it and they could finally register his stepfather's eldest son as their only legal child.

Luo Chengle is very, very angry.

“They’re bad!” he protests. He’s frowning, his face clearly horrified. “Very bad! They can’t! Did they change you with those other child?! Bad! *Bad*!”

“Uh, it’s okay,” says Airplane, shrugging. A little shy at first, he pats Chengle’s little head. They’re both sitting on the floor on cushions and wrapped in blankets, feeling safe. Airplane has even changed out of his street clothes into a slightly worn Shen Yuan pajama that’s a bit tight. “It was a long time ago. I’m all grown up now, big and strong. It’s no problem.”

“Yes, it does!” And when Luo Chengle complains, Shen Yuan sits up a little toward him. *That* sounds like a real kind of complaint, something ugly that might actually end in tears. “It’s not *right*! I don’t want to! Why are mothers so mean? I don’t like *them*! I hate all the mothers!”

“Moms are people who take actions that can be very good or very bad,” Shen Yuan says. Luo Chengle turns to look at him with a big pout, his eyes watery. “Those actions can make something hurt a lot, or something feel very beautiful. Not everything is bad or good. They are decisions that lead to actions that *have* consequences. It’s not because she was a bad mother. It’s because she was a person who made very bad decisions.”

“Uh,” and when Shen Yuan looks at Airplane, he too looks like he’s going to cry. Holy shit, brilliant, that’s exactly what he needed. Well, excuse him for touching on sensitive subjects! He’s just trying to raise a child! “Well, uh. Who’s hungry? I’ll… uh… heat up some food.”

Airplane flees, blanket around it included.

Luo Chengle pouts more. Shen Yuan pats the bed beside him, and very carefully, Chengle climbs in beside him. Shen Yuan cradles him in his arms, rocking him as much as he can without his back creaking in pain.

“Chengle,” he begins, before regretting it. “Why are you so afraid your mom will replace you?”

Luo Chengle doesn't reply immediately. His pout trembles more.

“She already did,” he stammers, and hides his face against Shen Yuan’s chest. Shen Yuan keeps stroking his hair and tries to keep at the same pace even as he says, “now Mother has a new baby and she doesn’t love me anymore. She won’t play with me or look at gardens or read stories. She’s tired and sad and cries a lot and the baby cries more and Aunt Lingling is with the baby all the time because Mother won’t get out of bed and when she does she’s very angry and very sad and mouth bleed and Aunt Lingling has to calm her down because she gets more sick and no one is with me.”

Shen Yuan squeezes Chengle in a hug as tight as his arms can carry him.

“I’m sure your mom loves you,” he says, and Chengle squirms to protest, but Shen Yuan speaks as quickly as he can. “Sometimes, when moms have babies, their bodies get… very sad. Just like when they were very emotional during pregnancy, or very hungry, when the baby is born it takes a long time for their bodies to return to normal. Chengle, sweet baby, your mom loves you *very much.* She’s always loved her family,” and Shen Yuan is very sure

of it. Wasn’t that why Liu Mingyan married Luo Binghe, after all? To have revenge for her brother’s death? What is that but devoted love for her family after all? “She’s just so, so sad, she can’t show her love to you.”

Luo Chengle cries harder. Shen Yuan holds him close, cradling him. He lets him cry, allowing the boy to vent weeks, if not months, of pain and loneliness in the embrace and crying. He imagines it can't be easy for a child like Chengle, so clingy and needy for love and approval, not least to cope with the fact that his mother, who until now had apparently been his alone, has now had another baby.

And Liu Mingyan clearly suffering from some form of postpartum depression? Well, holly fuck. Shen Yuan figures even the strongest female cultivators can't escape the occupational hazards of being a woman and having children, after all.

At one point, Luo Chengle falls asleep in his arms, tears sticking to his eyelashes and small hiccups between his breaths. Shen Yuan sighs, staring up at the ceiling of his room, where he's carried Chengle on his shoulders, both of them climbing onto the bed, risking falling at least five times, to stick a large pile of glow-in-the-dark stars on it.

He can't blame Liu Mingyan; it's not as if, with the little medical knowledge related to mental issues beyond calling them 'heart demons', she could have done anything better than cry in bed and get urgent help when she is having a qi deviation. But it's not Luo Chengle's fault, either. No child should have to live through a horrendous situation like that—and no child should even have to live through the very bad situation Shen Yuan is putting him through now.

With his heart aching in his chest, Shen Yuan knows there is only one person to blame.

Knowing this just makes him miserable.

Chapter End Notes

SY: ...am I the only one in this room who doesn't have abandonment issues? Seriously?

Tripadvisor was my best friend while writing this chapter. That, and watching videos of the Beijing Zoo with my sister :P It was a strange surprise for me to learn that according to tourist reviews, the Beijing Zoo is in such poor condition and has such poor care for its non-pandas animals, considering their reputation for taking very good care of their pandas. Anyway, sad for those little animals, but we'll narratively pretend it's a perfect zoo so Chengle can have an adorable experience :D

THERE'S A NEW SHEN BROTHER ON THE MAP HEHEHEHEHEH he is a possibility I haven't seen THAT MUCH (I think I read something similar in a fic? Or was it something on Tumblr? I'm not really sure), but it feels SO fun to play with hehehehe I bet you can guess who is :3
Mama Shen has already adopted a new grandson. Bold of Bingbong to assume he'll take

that happy grandmother's new grandson off her hands. Let Bingbong be grateful Mama Shen lets visit him :P

Did you know that in China, the one-child law wasn't as strict in rural areas, so some families paid small fortunes to alter their children's birth certificates to show they lived in the less populated countryside so they could legally have more children? Not me. I found out while writing this. I don't know how widely it's understood, but aha, Airplane's stepfather simply took the best excuse to throw him out of the house so he could register his own son as the eldest son in that family since Airplane, well, is now legally an adult and no longer living under his roof. Poor my dear Airplane. I had to give him some trauma to justify why he projects this way onto his characters :P

AHHH, I HAD SO MUCH FUN WRITING TODAY'S CHAPTER. And I FEEL SO HAPPY KNOWING THAT I GOT SEVERAL OF YOU CRAVING SUSHI BECAUSE I GOT SUSHICRAVING TOO AND HAD TO BUY SUSHI. IT'S MY DINNER TODAY LOL oh seriously it was fun watching animal videos and adding little details from the obsessive-zoologist Shen Yuan because whether they're PIDW monsters or not, he sure knows ridiculous details about flora and fauna :3 We love him silly boy careless with his own health
I hope you enjoyed the chapter a lot!! Seriously, I'm CRAZED. Do you realize how many COMMENTS AND KUDOS are getting here???? Every comment and new kudo feeds my hunger and you guys have me SATISFIED. I don't know how long the streak can last but hey let's enjoy it in the meantime!!!!

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING I'm kudo - comment - interaction away - thanks for making me happy - thanks for joining me on our streak - SEE YOU SOON!!!

Chapter 6: Wednesday to Friday, third week

Chapter Notes

> All of you: WOW, you represent chronic illness, child abandonment, trauma, and mental health issues so well!!
> Me: THANK YOU SO MUCH??? Uh, yeah, uh, it's a personal experience :D
>
> LOL, REALLY, THANK YOU SO MUCH, EVERYONE!!! YOU REALLY HAVE ME SPEECHLESS. THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING AND SHARING THIS WITH ME :3 I'm taking this as a personally enriching experience and routine (writing a certain amount of words a day is DEFINITELY helping with my creativity!!! I don't recommend it at all.)
>
> Chapter warnings: more mentions of physical therapy procedures and pain. Brief hint of uncontrolled meds use :P
>
> Enjoy the chapter!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By Wednesday, Shen Yuan is already doing much better by his own standards than he expected. He still can't walk on his own, but his muscles respond much better to the tension of sitting. His nurse's massages and physiotherapy are a huge help, which continues to make him cry like a baby. But then Chengle shows up with a beautiful drawing of him and Shen Yuan in the park, and Shen Yuan can't help but hug him and wants to hang the drawing in a gilded frame on his wall.

Airplane doesn't leave; he settles down with a blanket on the couch, which he says is still more comfortable than sleeping in his own bed, and the heating is better. He types his chapters, hunched over in Shen Yuan's desk chair with his old laptop on his lap—from where Shen Yuan is standing, he can *literally see* some letters are missing—typing like crazy for the entire duration of Mulan and Hercules.

Airplane doesn't burn the microwave or any pots heating up meals in the refrigerator, and only at night does Shen Yuan reward him with his unlocked phone and tell him to go crazy and order any food he wants. They end up eating a lot of crispy, slightly spicy fried chicken and ramen noodles, and Airplane cries dramatically over his ramen bowl, which he repeatedly says tastes way better than his usual instant ramen.

Shen Yuan guesses so. Not that he's going to let Chengle try it, anyway.

Luo Chengle is fascinated by fried chicken. Shen Yuan is sure it's something they'll have to consider. Maybe ask kitchen Ayi to make similar recipes, without so many commercial

additives? Yeah, the secret sauce is probably unsalvageable, but he's not sure how healthy it is for a growing child to have such an unhealthy fast food dish as comfort food.

Then, as he stares at his own ramen, Shen Yuan finds himself laughing, a strange and unfamiliar sense of horror, almost terror creeping into his chest. Since when the hell did his head become like *this*? What was it? Did a chip activate in his brain, automatically formatting all his thoughts to Luo Chengle? Thinking of healthy foods, alternatives to continue indulging him without hurting him… He's pretty sure he's never been that concerned with his own health, so why is it suddenly as if all that caring and loving concern has activated in his brain, dedicated and devoted completely to the sweet little boy now trying to steal one of Airplane's chicken pieces?

Shen Yuan… couldn't be happier to have him in his life.

In some way he can't explain, with a sensation so intoxicatingly ridiculous it hits him almost physically, Shen Yuan feels as if his brain has woken up. As if it's gone off autopilot—no two days are the same now, even if the activities within each day are similar. In a strange way, a way he never thought he'd feel, Shen Yuan feels as if after sleeping for so long, he's woken up.

He supposes that's what caring for a child does.

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On Thursday, Shen Yuan was able to stand on his own. It's painful; he definitely couldn't do it without his cane, but even the nurse recommends taking short walks: constant movement, massage, pressure, heat, more cream, avoiding medications and antacids if he's going to take them.

Also on Thursday, Shen Yuan opens the door to his brother.

"Ming-ge," he says, and steps back. His brother has longer-than-appropriate hair combed back, is wearing a face mask, and smells like he's applied enough sanitizer to make Shen Yuan feel dizzy. "It's been a while. How was work?"

"Where did you kidnap the child from?" his brother asks directly, kicking off his shoes. Shen Yuan lets him advance, closing the door behind him and, with great effort, moving with his cane to chase him.

"He's a friend's son," says Shen Yuan.

"Do *you have* any friends?" Ming-ge asks, raising an eyebrow in a clearly accusatory manner. Well, as brusque as ever. Truth be told, Shen Yuan missed him quite a bit. It's not that he doesn't get plenty of visits from his brothers—in fact, more than once every six months is probably too much. Alone, well. The last time he'd seen him had been over six months ago, in fact. As far as Shen Yuan knew, his brother had been shuttling around using the excuse of business trips to locations strategically positioned to coincide with his martial arts competitions.

“Believe it or not, yes,” he murmurs. He almost trips over the crease in the carpet and his cane, and Ming-ge catches him before he even stumbles. “Oh, sorry, it’s just a bad day.”

“So why are you standing up? You should have a full-time nurse taking over whenever you need it,” Ming-ge mutters, clearly annoyed. He lets Shen Yuan sit down, looking at him with a frown. “Mom said you might be having bad days. Your nurse told her.”

“I thought so,” Shen Yuan rubs at the small, budding headache on his forehead. “I’m better now, by the way. Thanks for the huge concern and flooding my phone with messages.”

“And the child?”

Shen Yuan points to the kitchen door. Ajar as it is, Luo Chengle is clearly visible, his little feet dangling off the chair, his oversized plush tiger slippers barely touching the floor. Airplane is standing beside him, and has even stopped typing on his laptop, craning his head like a starved turtle looking to see who has entered.

“Let me introduce you, though I won’t be moving too much,” he murmurs, pointing. “The child is Luo Chengle. The adult next to him is *another* friend that you can call Airplane. No, they’re not related. As you can see, I have *many* more friends than you’d think.”

“Since when do you do charity work?” Ming-ge mumbles. Only when he’s away from Shen Yuan does he lower his mask, and Shen Yuan supposes it’s for the best. Honestly, he’s pretty fed up with being the only unattractive one in the family, with his cheeks rounded from corticosteroids and dark circles under his eyes from chronic fatigue. “You, kid. Come here, I want to see you.”

Luo Chengle's face scrunches up in disgust. He looks at Shen Yuan, who gives him a thumbs-up to indicate that everything is fine. Only then does Luo Chengle jump up from his chair and walk right up to him.

There's a lot of curiosity in his little eyes. Before Shen Yuan can say anything, Luo Chengle, in a low, strange voice, says, "You look like my mother. But old. Yuan-ge, who is he?"

“Hey,” Ming-ge crosses his arms over his chest. Shen Yuan bites the inside of his cheek, holding back a laugh. My, my, so his brother resembled the peerless beauty Liu Mingyan? He’d always told Ming-ge that he had a girly face. “I’m standing right in front of you. You have to speak to me, not Yuan-di. Be respectful, kid.”

Luo Chengle stares at Ming-ge for a long moment. Then he turns his gaze to Shen Yuan.

“He’s rude. I don’t like him,” he decides, his voice firm. “Yuan-ge, can he go?”

“You brat!”

Shen Yuan can't contain himself. He bursts out laughing, which he quickly hides behind a pillow. Even so, when he uncovers his face, even Airplane has craned his neck further, staring out into the room with his mouth agape.

“Ah, Chengle, come here,” he patted the sofa beside him. Luo Chengle quickly ran to sit down, dodging Ming-ge’s attempts to catch him with absolute speed. “Remember my Meimei? Well, he’s my older brother. His name is Shen Mingsu. I know he’s grumpy and has a girly face, but I promise you he’s good, just autistic.”

“You-…” Ming-ge turns around, his face red to the roots of his hair. Shen Yuan laughs, even more so when just before he finishes approaching, he pulls his face mask back up, as if ready to fight him.

“I’m not Jiu-ge,” Shen Yuan warns. “You can’t fight me just because you don’t know how to use your words. I have a cane, and I won’t hesitate to use it.”

Ming-ge calms down only slightly after that. Shen Yuan also has to explain exactly what it means to be autistic to Chengle, but he seems to understand it quite well.

Airplane joins in when he sees there's no violence involved. He swallows a couple of dirty looks from Ming-ge, but Shen Yuan believes he can survive it. Luo Chengle also tones down his bad behavior when he realizes that it's not that Ming-ge wants to fight him, he's just like that with everyone, and he even seems amused when Chengle responds with longer, more confident answers than just shy words. Only when Ming-ge goes to make some tea for them to drink, insisting it was leaves he had brought straight from Japan, does Shen Yuan collapse onto the sofa, pulling Chengle into a hug with him.

“Ming-ge is a difficult person, and I thank you so much for trying,” he congratulates, pulling him into a tight hug. The boy giggles as Shen Yuan ruffles his hair. “You’re the best kid in the whole world, and I’m so, so proud of you.”

“Hey,” Airplane protests, sitting on the other side of the couch. “I survived your brother too. I thought he was going to bite me.”

“Do you want me to congratulate you and pat your head like a dog?” Shen Yuan complains. Airplane grimaces, clearly seeing that Shen Yuan is doing exactly that to the boy perched on his lap, whom he’s hugging like a giant octopus. Still, Shen Yuan mutters: “Well, I guess I’ve seen people more terrified of my brother.”

Airplane seems satisfied with that.

Ming-ge pours tea for Shen Yuan, Airplane, and himself, along with a small cup of warm milk for Chengle.

“Raw milk is bad,” he insists, looking at Shen Yuan with what Shen Yuan can only identify as suspicion. It’s not like Ming-ge has any more default expressions on his face anyway. “It’s good you have semi-skimmed milk. Who’s been doing your shopping? You *even* have real food.”

“I’m an adult, I can take care of myself,” Shen Yuan grumbles, tasting his tea. Well… it is tea. It tastes good, he supposes. He’s not a tea fanatic like his brothers, anyway, but he supposes it tastes good. “How could I not have real food? I have a child to feed. And I’ve been feeding Chengle very well, haven’t I?”

“Yes!” Chengle smiles, an adorable milk mustache over his mouth. “Yuan-ge hired an Ayi who cooks delicious food! And she always asks what I liked and gives me milk sweets, and she doesn’t want to marry Yuan-ge.”

Airplane chokes on his teacup. When Ming-ge hits Airplane's back, the fool chokes again, though that's probably because of how hard Ming-ge is hitting him on the back.

“And why would it be a good thing if she doesn’t want to marry Yuan-di? He’s already of marriageable age,” Ming-ge says, looking at Luo Chengle as if something about the little boy clearly makes him want to examine him with a magnifying glass. Shen Yuan hopes that whatever he saw in him is temporary; honestly, he’s not sure he wants repeat visits from either of his nosy brothers.

“No!” says Luo Chengle, so loudly that the cup on the coffee table in front of him moves as if the momentum of his shout had moved it. Shen Yuan prays that Ming-ge hasn’t noticed. “No, no! Yuan-ge isn’t getting married! He’s my Yuan-ge and he takes care of me and I take care of him. He doesn’t need wives or babies or anyone else but Chengle. Chengle is Yuan-ge’s only child.”

“Also,” Shen Yuan got Ming-ge’s attention and gently patted Chengle’s head at the same time, trying to calm his outburst. “How could this Yuan-di marry before his Da-ge? Truly, what a problem. I wouldn’t feel capable of disgracing my older brother like that.”

Ming-ge looks away, his ears red, and drinks his teacup as if it were a bad drink of alcohol. Shen Yuan moves Chengle's cup closer to him, also wiping the milk stains on his face with the sleeve of his sweater. Ah, it's just clothes, and will be washed later. When Luo Chengle gives him a wide, radiant smile, that definitely matters more than the dirty clothes.

“You’re spoiling him,” Ming-ge complains, because he definitely has to find something to complain about. “Where are his parents, anyway? You’re not going to keep him forever.”

Luo Chengle's smile immediately fades. The way he's looking at Ming-ge makes even Airplane, the silent gossiping bastard, shrink back in clear fear.

“I’m sorting that out,” Shen Yuan says quickly, before Chengle can say something that would clearly alarm his brother. “It’s not a pleasant topic to discuss with children present. Ming-ge, how was your trip? Did you get a new medal?”

As if swept away by the wave of his favorite topic of conversation, Ming-ge is transformed. Shen Yuan pulls Chengle onto his lap, hugging him, rubbing his little arms, and rocking them both while Ming-ge talks. His brother spends at least half an hour talking only about the techniques of the losing contestants and how they might be corrected, and by the time he starts talking about the main competitions, Luo Chengle has become distracted enough to follow the conversation and ask questions about martial arts with eyes that are more curious than frightened.

Ming-ge doesn't need much incentives. He takes off his white leather jacket and is soon showing Luo Chengle the moves that won him the win, performing all sorts of acrobatics that

Shen Yuan is pretty sure will make his downstairs neighbors complain almost as loudly as they did the day Luo Chengle arrived.

The second half of his brother's visit is considerably better than the first. Shen Yuan stands up and does his obligatory pacing so his legs don't go numb and lose their newly regained mobility. Airplane eventually returns to balancing his laptop on his knees, typing furiously, interrupted only by occasional moments where he fiddles with his phone, pretending he's not taking photos with a goofy, idiotic smile.

Luo Chengle laughs a little more each time. He even allows Ming-ge to correct his posture when he kicks in the air. It's no surprise to Shen Yuan that Luo Chengle has quite a bit of martial arts training after all, but it's almost endearing to see him enjoy it, laughing when Ming-ge digs his fingertips into his ribs to keep his posture and back straight and from slouching when he jumps and kicks. When Luo Chengle succeeds, he looks over to where Shen Yuan is standing, smiling broadly.

“Yuan-ge, Yuan-ge! Did you see it?! I did it! I did it!”

The little curly bunny hops up to him, and Shen Yuan pulls him into a hug even though he has to bend over painfully and awkwardly.

“I saw it!” he says with joy. “You did very well. I’m very proud.”

When Luo Chengle returns to Ming-ge, his expression burning with curiosity instead of the evasive one he always had whenever they saw anything related to violence or martial arts (Mulan included!), Shen Yuan figures he's not that against his brother visiting if it'll help heal some of the wounds in Chengle's heart.

“Love me. I recorded it,” says Airplane, holding his phone. The screen is cracked in many places, but his camera seems good, and the video quality isn’t bad when Airplane sends it to him.

The video isn't too long. Luo Chengle tries once, twice, and on the third try, he succeeds. His face flashes with surprise, and only a moment later, he glows and turns directly to where Shen Yuan stands, a blurry figure, in the background. The video cuts out just as he runs toward him.

Shen Yuan rewinds the video over and over again. Luo Chengle's surprise is something that hurts, as if he believes himself incapable of achieving it. Then, when surprise is followed by joy, his face shines like stars that send shivers down Shen Yuan's spine when the first person he turns to share it with is him.

Ah. Shen Yuan is very, very lost at this point, isn't he?

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By Friday, Shen Yuan's pain is less severe, but the cramps are more intense. They are excruciating, leaving him literally shaking, breaking out in a cold sweat, and fighting back

tears as the pain spreads in brief bursts that affect him whether he's lying down, standing, or sitting. He stocks up on magnesium supplements and drinkable whey.

“How many meds do you take?” Airplane asks, a little confused. “Is it… uh, safe to take so many so close together?”

“They’re supplements,” Shen Yuan mumbles, shrugging. He doesn’t say anything about the antacids because, well. They’re antacids. At a certain point, when he has to take pills, gastric wraps are quite necessary and recommended. He has much less heartburn and burning in the pit of his stomach since he started taking them, so he assumes everything is fine. “They’re like regular vitamin. And my other medications are mandatory and prescribed.”

“Uh, I’m not calling you a drug addict or anything, calm down,” Airplane raises both hands, his expression clearly open. Shen Yuan sighs. Pain tends to put him in a pretty bad mood even on a good day, but he also supposes it’s something that could happen to anyone. “I just mean, uh. Is it… healthy?”

“Nothing in my body is healthy,” Shen Yuan says, shrugging. “Really, it’s fine. It’s *normal*.”

Airplane doesn't look convinced. Luckily, Luo Chengle can't hear the conversation, and when he comes out of the bathroom with his hair soaking wet, Shen Yuan gives Airplane all the instructions he needs to dry and style it properly. It's still a little bland, like the first time Shen Yuan followed the tutorials, but it's still a better effort than just brushing it and sloppily putting it in a high bun.

Shen Yuan then introduces Luo Chengle to the wonderful world of anime, letting him watch a couple of episodes of Hamtaro after breakfast while he doing the stretches recommended by the nurse. His body complains, protesting like an old puppet with unoiled hinges, but Shen Yuan waits for it. He doesn't expect to be able to do any athletic movements when the last time he did anything more than walk was in high school.

He gives up when the pain outweighs the gain. Then, since he still has to walk a little further to avoid going numb, he takes advantage of the opportunity to take a short walk back and forth, rearranging Chengle's drawings. Luo Chengle has been drawing a lot, and Shen Yuan notes, not without some surprise, the great evolution of his drawings, even in such a short time. The first ones used long lines, stripes constantly spilling out of the edges, and rapid, almost desperate ways of coloring. His new drawings not only use many more colors, but they look much less chaotic, calmer, and quite well-placed. There is a painted floor on which people are standing; there are also ducks, tigers, a Shen Yuan, a Luo Chengle, and sometimes an airplane. Shen Yuan hangs several more drawings with tape in his room and puts a rather adorable one of the Duck King from the story Chengle had made with magnets on the refrigerator.

His legs burn a little from tiredness, but that's expected and normal when he sits next to Chengle. They watch another episode together before he decides he's had enough TV for today. And Chengle, the sweet and well-behaved boy that he is, doesn't complain. He simply chooses one of the dinosaur books and tries to recreate one with crayons on a sheet of paper next to him.

Shen Yuan hands a draw to Airplane.

“That’s you,” he points to the humanoid figure with enormous glasses and coils of curls on its head. “And that’s King Duck, Blue Flamingo, and Mother Kangaroo with her adopted son, Baby Fennec Fox. He drew you with the characters from the stories he makes up. I suppose it’s somehow hereditary, Airplane-yeye.”

“Bro,” Airplane stares at the drawing as if it were a treasure on a piece of crayoned paper. Shen Yuan can understand the feeling perfectly well. “Yeah, he told me those stories. He has potential, he has potential. Turn around now or I’ll cry in your face.”

Shen Yuan allows him privacy to be happy in peace. He goes with Chengle and listens to the sweet boy's every word about his favorite dinosaurs and how he understands simplified characters much better now, and he reads aloud to him about his dinosaur books. Even if he gets some of them mixed up, Shen Yuan assumes it makes sense, so he corrects him with gentle patience.

The constant typing of Airplane is a background hum that won't leave him.

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Later the same Friday, Shen Yuan wakes up from a nap feeling a little better, even though it's drizzling outside with a fairly strong wind, and the dampness squeaks against his joints. He celebrates by tickling Luo Chengle and letting the boy's joyful laughter brighten his morning as if a great sun has risen.

His online orders also arrive.

“For you,” Shen Yuan says, handing Airplane the two unopened boxes. “Consider this your payment for babysitting him.”

Airplane rolls his eyes, of course, but with the excitement of a child, he tears the ribbon off the box. His jaw drops, and Shen Yuan turns his back on him, kissing Chengle's forehead as he passes the boy, who is intently finishing the end of his exercise book.

“Bro,” and Airplane eventually follows. He’s still holding the box *with* the new laptop inside, and Shen Yuan can see his hands shaking. “Oh my god, *what*? I mean. *I mean.* It’s not that I don’t appreciate it. But damn, Cucumber-bro, what the…? I feel bad accepting it. I just clowned around for a bit with my cute little grandson.”

“I told you I was going to pay you,” Shen Yuan says, shrugging. “Besides, you’ve been helping with everything. How could I not help you with that?”

Airplane has watery eyes like a giant, crying baby. Shen Yuan has to stoically endure the pathetic little man clinging to him, hugging him and telling him he'd never thought his Cucumber-bro could be so sweet, that he has no reason to be so wonderful, that what the hell, that if he wants to steal his kidney, he doesn't have to, just ask him and he'll give it to him willingly.

And Airplane repeats his crying scene when he opens the other box and finds a new phone. Shen Yuan's excuse this time is that if he's going to take more photos and videos of Luo Chengle, he should do it with something good quality. He can't allow those little pieces of his child to be lost in the low definition of a bad pic.

When the rain stops a little after late-afternoon, Shen Yuan urges Airplane to get Luo Chengle out of the apartment.

“There’s a children’s puppet show at the theater nearby,” he says, punching in the location on Airplane’s new phone. It’s not too far, and it’s a short walk both ways. Still, Shen Yuan doesn’t consider himself someone who gives hope: he’s sure he’ll need all the rest he can get if he wants to be fit for Sunday day with his parents. “Chengle thinks I didn’t notice, but he always looks curiously at the poster when we pass by. He hasn’t asked me, but he’d like to go.”

Luo Chengle is a little more opposed to leaving than Shen Yuan would have expected.

“I don’t want to!” he squeals, clinging tightly to Shen Yuan’s legs. “I don’t want to, I don’t want to! I don’t want to leave Yuan-ge!”

It takes them at least a while to calm down his little outburst. Shen Yuan promises him that he'll have fun, that he'd wanted to take him there but can't. Luo Chengle insists that if Shen Yuan can't, then Chengle doesn't want to go. It's a bit of a back-and-forth, in which Luo Chengle ends up somewhat reluctantly agreeing to go with his Uncle Airplane and bring back souvenirs for Shen Yuan, who promises to be at the apartment waiting for him and very excited for Chengle to tell him everything he saw and how much fun he had.

When the two of them leave, Shen Yuan lies face up on the couch, listening to the silence so much it hurts his ears. After a moment of miserable drama that he believes he deserves after three weeks where the only loneliness he's had is moments to go to the bathroom, he stands up and opens Airplane's old laptop, typing in the password the annoying guy had given him with the only condition that he not check his search history, and begins examining the files that the hack author had told him he had prepared for him.

Shen Yuan is surprised to find Airplane's files very well organized: there are individual folders for extra character information, backstories, and lines to be developed that didn't amount to much. They look like quickly rewritten drafts, and Shen Yuan remembers Airplane complaining a bit about losing his old laptop.

He browses through the various documents, reading, snooping more than anything. He doesn't find much about Luo Binghe other than excessive mentions that his story was destined to be a repetitive cycle of abuse, the victim becoming an abuser because of an abuser who was once a victim. He reads with a bit more curiosity about the backstory of Luo Binghe's parents, lamenting the potential that story could have had it been developed and Airplane hadn't decided that Tianlang Jun was too OP and should have locked him under a mountain.

There isn't much necessary, useful, or relevant information. Shen Yuan fills PIDW's plot holes halfway even with the information he obtains. There isn't much information or subplot

planning about Liu Mingyan, Binghe's children, or Luo Binghe himself from some point in his files, as if the plot planning had taken an almost entirely different direction than the one Airplane himself had planned.

Shen Yuan assumes he is hopeless; of course a character like Luo Binghe would be too much for anyone, including his own writer.

He doesn't have much of an idea what he's looking for. Answers? Some kind of subplot that explains things? A magic cure that will make Luo Binghe a good father, Liu Mingyan a mother without postpartum depression, and Luo Chengle a happy, cheerful child even in his own home? Shen Yuan sighs, rubbing his forehead. It's not like he's going to find written answers to any of that. These are things that happened, and narratively, it's not like they can be changed, can they? The things that need to change are outside of a narrative arc or explanation. The things that need to be changed… well. They need to be changed right now, and Shen Yuan doesn't have the power to do that from where he is, other than to pamper and dote on sweet Chengle the way he deserves.

He resignedly leaves his laptop on the table and starts heating up some food. When Luo Chengle and Airplane arrive, the house smells of food, and Luo Chengle runs up to him, hugging him for a long time before beginning to tell him in great detail how wonderful the puppet show was, how much fun he had, how much fun everything was, how even Yanshi and other children from the park were there.

“Oh, yeah,” Airplane says, his expression clearly mocking. “That little friend of Chengle’s mom was there. She asked about you and wished you get well, and she won’t be going to the park tomorrow because of the weather, but she’ll take that kid of hers to the playground at the mall in the afternoon.” And Airplane, the bastard, wiggles his eyebrows suggestively. “Looking for a milf, Cucumber-bro?”

Shen Yuan hits him square in the face with a dish towel and throws him out of the kitchen. Chengle is too used to Airplane talking nonsense by this point to not ask, finishing unpacking his backpack of gifts he bought for Shen Yuan already soaked in sanitizer. Shen Yuan is covered in trinkets from the flea market by the theater: a carved wooden duck figurine, a woven keychain, wooden bead bracelets. Shen Yuan puts it on his wrist, and Luo Chengle claps happily, showing that they match.

After dinner, brushing his teeth, taking a bath, and being wrapped in a warm blanket, Luo Chengle falls asleep with his head resting on Shen Yuan's legs while they watch a movie.

“Let me carry him,” Airplane extends his arms, carrying the very sleepy, slightly drooling Chengle over his shoulder. “Ah, pretty little boy. You know, Cucumber-bro? I never imagined being an uncle,” he whispers in a low voice.

Shen Yuan follows them into the bedroom where he moves the blankets so Airplane can lay Chengle down among pillows and stuffed animals.

“You have brothers. They’ll have children someday,” Shen Yuan complains, rummaging through his bathing clothes. Airplane gestures.

“I mean, yeah,” he murmurs, following him out of the room, “but not for a long time. And just now, wow. You're a good father to that kid.”

Shen Yuan stands there for a moment, his mouth agape, frozen to the bone, unable to respond.

“I’m *not*,” he says, and when he says it, it’s as if the coldness in his bones settles in his throat. It closes him, chokes him, and almost renders him mute. “Chengle already has a father. I’m taking care of him until Luo Binghe comes for him. I’m just a babysitter.”

“You basically adopted him,” Airplane complains, his voice completely relaxed, unable to notice that Shen Yuan is burning and freezing at the same time. It’s a strange sensation, so alien and unsettling it hurts. “That kid *adores* you. Damn, I hope Binghe doesn’t show up and you can keep him. I bet you’d be a better father than him.”

“Shut your mouth,” Shen Yuan hisses, marching off to the bathroom. He locks himself in with a slam that may have been too loud. It’s only when he’s sitting on the support chair, the hot water running down his face, that Shen Yuan allows himself to hold himself up by the arms, shivering as if the water were ice-cold.

No matter how hot it is, Shen Yuan trembles, a horrible, icy sensation against his chest, rising in his throat, settling behind his eyes. It burns, it hurts, and no matter how hard Shen Yuan clings to the futile beats of his heart, it's as if his entire body recognizes the pain as something alien, hostile. He's never felt anything like it, probably because, in his routine of identical, gray days, he's never had cause to feel so fiercely.

He adores Luo Chengle. He loves him. He's the sweetest, smartest, most creative, most adorable child. He's brave, strong, and funny. He has a possessive, jealous, and whiny nature, but beneath that, it's clear he's just a sweet, scared little boy—too clumsy, too impulsive, too full of a sparkling kindness that makes him so much, so much, *so much* more than Shen Yuan could ever imagine a sweet little child could be.

More than a white lotus, more than a stereotypical… character. Shen Yuan never thought of Luo Chengle as a character, probably because he'd never actually *read* about him. If PIDW had ever mentioned Liu Mingyan having children, it had been too superficial, the kind of thing that would never be developed so that shitty readers wouldn't lose the appeal of their favorite female characters; the book had never even dwelled on the papapa scenes with her, which in Shen Yuan's eyes, was perfectly fine. Liu Mingyan had been an interesting enough character without reducing her to just another dumb wife.

Shen Yuan lets the warm water fall on his face. Even so, he can feel the salt from his tears burning him.

He's *not* Luo Chengle's father. Luo Chengle has a father who, now approaching the end of his third week without his child, *still hasn't come for him.* Between a stupid sob, Shen Yuan stifles an absurd laugh. How the hell could he go three whole weeks without even noticing that sweet little boy was gone? How the hell could someone like Luo Binghe be such a careless father that the disappearance of his son would just pass him by like that?

There has to be a reason, he wants to convince himself. Perhaps he hasn't found the exact world Luo Chengle arrived in; it must be difficult, after all, it's not like Luo Chengle used Xin Mo responsibly, and it's not like he had a fixed place to arrive besides just going far, far away from the palace, to a place of safety. And, wasn't this world without wars, without chaos, without demons the safest place Chengle could be?

Luo Binghe will cross the worlds from him. Shen Yuan will have some *serious* words with him and his poor parenting methods. He will ask to go to the palace and see how he can help Liu Mingyan, and he will try to make everything work out… well. Luo Chengle will have a safe, family-oriented, healthy environment to grow up in, even if Shen Yuan has to go around threatening children and jealous wives by turning his children against the children of the main wives.

And *then*?

What will he do when he manages to sort out Chengle's life a little? What will he do when he returns to his empty apartment, walls covered with Chengle's drawings, bed with his stuffed animals, and all his clothes in the closet?

Shen Yuan is sure his face will be a mess when he gets out of the damn shower, but he doesn't care at all. Fuck. What the hell will he do when Luo Chengle returns to his real father and his real family, a world away, with no idea when he'll even see him again?

Shen Yuan… isn't too sure that his life is worth living enough that he wouldn't be able to give it up if necessary to follow Luo Chengle wherever his sweet boy goes, just to make sure he's happy.

Chapter End Notes

SY: Well, I always knew Ming-ge had a girly face lol
SY, when he meets LMY: ... I'm really needing some kind of explanation right now

lol Bingge will want explanations too, but he definitely won't get them heheheh
Ming-ge is a good brother, he's just a little autistic, don't worry (it's funny because my sister often says that about me LOL)
I like spoiling Airplane, what can I say? I think he deserves it :') There's nothing a tired writer could want more than a platonic sugar daddy who'll buy him expensive gifts and pay his rent while he sits down to write. I mean, I would want that

Oh, and to think, when I started writing this concept, I was like, EH, it'll just be some silly fluff to relax with. WELL, WHY DO I EVEN BELIEVE IN MYSELF? REALLY? I have no regrets at all. I'm sorry, Shen Yuan, I promise my intentions aren't to make you suffer... most of the time, it's just a side effect :P Still, I love him, my blorbo

Thank you SO much again for reading. Seriously. You have no idea how WONDERFUL it is to go on this journey with all of you. I feel like we're on the same wavelength,

jumping around a huge room full of the same gifts. I don't know if that makes sense, but ???? in my head, we're just chatting and having fun together. So, THANK YOU. LET'S KEEP UP OUR STREAK!!!
YOU KNOW!! I hope you liked the chapter. I HAD FUN WITH MING-GE AND I HOPE YOU LIKED HIM TOO, A LIU QINGGE WILL ALWAYS BE LIU QINGGE NO MATTER WHERE YOU PUT HIM :B Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU for reading. I'm a kudo-comment-interaction away. I LOVE YOU ALL, THANK YOU FOR SO MUCH, see you soon!!! ;3

Chapter 7: Saturday and Sunday, third week

Chapter Notes

> WE'RE HERE FOR THE WEEK OF DAILY UPDATES!!!! How long will this last? God knows. I'll probably take a break at some point trust me I need it but it won't be now because I'm getting more closer to Binghe and Bingyuan's rap battle for Chengle's custody, and I'm really excited about it lol
>
> Enjoy the chapter!! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Airplane finally returns home on Saturday morning with a new backpack, new laptop, new phone, new clothes and money for food and rent expenses, joking that he will visit more often if he is going to be sent back with so many things. And on the evening of that same Saturday, when Shen Yuan has already chosen all the most elegant clothes they will wear with Chengle at dinner with his family tomorrow, Luo Chengle approaches him with a sparkle in his eyes.

It's true that Luo Chengle is usually a more impulsive child, acting immediately rather than being thoughtful or meditative. Shen Yuan has left him in the privacy of his thoughts for most of the afternoon, accepting that it's best for the child to decide to share them when it's right for him without intruding or invading his space. Finally, Chengle pulls on his sleeve, staring at him intently.

“Yuan-ge,” he says, looking very determined, “Yuan-ge is always so nice and kind with Chengle.”

“How could I be any other way?” Shen Yuan pats him on the head. The child blinks sweetly.

“But it's not fair,” the child protests, and Shen Yuan raises an eyebrow, curious. "I don't have anything for Yuan-ge. And even if I do give gifts, they're gifts that Yuan-ge gives me. It's not *fair*."

“Hey,” Shen Yuan pinches his cheek gently. “Sweetie, you don't have to give me anything. I want you to be happy. If you're happy, you're already giving me your happiness as a gift.”

“But it's not right,” Chengle pouts even more. His expression is tragically pitiful. “I love Yuan-ge very much. Yuan-ge always gives me my favorite foods and watches the same movies I like, even though Yuan-ge has seen them *many* times. And he always says my drawings are cute, even though they're ugly and talentless.”

“Hey,” Shen Yuan protests with a little ‘boop’ on the child’s little nose. “They're really cute. I love them.”

“I know,” Chengle makes a really sad face. “That's worse! Yuan-ge has bad taste!”

Shen Yuan finds himself laughing before he can control it. The boy grunts a little, squirming when Shen Yuan hugs him tightly, but he makes no effort to escape the embrace.

“I adore you,” Shen Yuan murmurs against the little head of his tiny little devil. “Really, Chengle. Just by being happy, you're giving me something enormous.”

“But Yuan-ge deserves more,” the boy complains. Determination is back in his eyes, his expression so serious and solemn that it can only be adorable. “I want to heal Yuan-ge. So that Yuan-ge won't hurt anymore.”

“Mm,” Shen Yuan hums. Ah, this boy always worrying too much and too much about everything. “You're too young for that. Maybe you can be a doctor someday?”

“Yuan-ge,” Luo Chengle protests, pouting and tugging at Shen Yuan's hands. “Chengle is serious!”

And before Shen Yuan can say anything in response, he feels as if liquid heat is pushing through his hands.

“*Chengle*,” he says, his voice choked, but the boy squeezes his fingers together. His gaze shines brighter and brighter with iron determination, red dominating his eyes in a totally unexpected way, the little zuiyin burning on his forehead. “Chengle, you're going to hurt yourself,” Shen Yuan warns, trying not to tell him that *he's hurting him.*

It burns, for a moment. Like plunging his hands into boiling water, and the pain that invades him is probably comparable to a bad day in his muscles. However, once his nerves seem to understand that although there is heat there is no fire, he can only feel as if he has drunk something very hot, spreading from his hands to his arms, his shoulders, his chest.

“Chengle,” and Shen Yuan opens his mouth, closes it, unable to say more. The boy has his eyebrows furrowed in concentration, his little mouth pursed as he pushes more... qi, Shen Yuan assumes? If he concentrates too hard on the sensation, his skin bristles in the same strange way that Chengle's qi circulation does to demonstrate the zuiyin on his forehead. It is less arduous, much warmer, and definitely an overwhelming relief when he feels the heat sliding down his back, toward his legs like hot water filled with medicine sweeping through him. His gaze is strong, but even so, it seems to be an enormous effort for him, his lips trembling and his eyes too bright, reddened to the point that Shen Yuan has only seen when he arrived with that bad qi deviation. “It's okay. You're doing well, sweetheart. But you don't have to wear yourself out anymore, okay?”

Luo Chengle slowly withdraws that sensation. When Shen Yuan can finally only feel it in his hands, the boy lets go, throwing himself into his arms. Shen Yuan hugs him as tightly as he can.

“Yuan-ge is the best,” Chengle says, his voice soft and small. “I don't want Yuan-ge to ever suffer. It's ugly. I don't like it.”

Shen Yuan can't remember a day in years when nothing hurt him. For a moment, the feeling is overwhelming. His skin feels strange, his muscles light. Still, he holds fast to his embrace and his own determination.

“I appreciate Chengle caring,” he coos, "and you've done very well. My sweet boy is so powerful and talented. But you can't do that again, okay?"

“But!” Chengle pulls away. Although his eyes have darkened, the little mark on his forehead glows. It's an adorable thing, and Shen Yuan gives in to the temptation to leave a little butterfly kiss there, on the slightly warmer skin. “But it's good for Yuan-ge. I could feel it.”

“You're just a child,” Shen Yuan hums, rubbing his back gently. “I don't know how qi works in this world, I don't even know if you could cultivate here if it wears you down enough to make you feel weak and hurt yourself. It's dangerous to act without knowing first, okay, sweetheart? I don't want you to be in danger. It's important to me to know that you won't be in danger.”

It's a bit of a tug of war, but Shen Yuan wins—not that he expected otherwise, anyway. He wasn't going to give in on something that involved a level of risk to the child. He hugs Luo Chengle tightly, rocks him, reads him a bedtime story, and the child falls asleep before the end. Still, Shen Yuan continues reading the last few pages, hoping that the ending will reach his dreams peacefully rather than in some ugly nightmare.

When Shen Yuan leaves only the night light on when he goes to sleep, the only thing illuminating the room besides the pink glow of the salt lamp is the red zuiyin on Chengle's forehead, perhaps too bright, not yet fading even if it is not actively flowing his qi as on other occasions. Shen Yuan can only hope that there won't be a demonic mark glowing on Luo Chengle's forehead in the morning, or he'll have a lot to explain to his mother.

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On Sunday, it is late morning when Shen Yuan wakes up. His head hurts a lot and his mouth feels dry, as if he had been talking in his sleep. Luo Chengle is also a little grumpy, grumbling and unwilling to leave the embrace of the sheets, but he doesn't seem to remember dreaming anything bad, so Shen Yuan assumes that he probably disturbed him by talking in his sleep.

Still, his sweet boy cheers up a little with breakfast. When it's time to leave, they are both dressed in their most elegant clothes, but not to the extent of formal suits—although Shen Yuan feels an absolute need to see little Chengle in a tiny suit with a little tie, he doesn't think he'll have an excuse to do so anytime soon. Shen Yuan has prepared handbags for both of them and carries his cane only out of habit, although he hasn't felt so light on his feet in... his entire life. Shen Yuan also carries a change of clothes for Chengle, because he knows that having Luo Chengle and Shen Mingsu in the same garden will probably mean that they will both end up rolling around on the ground and kicking their feet in the air.

No Didi-car is waiting for them downstairs. The driver in the car sent by his mother is wearing a practically mandatory face mask and bows respectfully to them, immediately picking up both Shen Yuan's handbag and Luo Chengle's small backpack as if they were

precious items. When Shen Yuan makes Chengle get in first, he is assaulted by the smell of the entire interior of the car having been exaggeratedly cleaned with alcohol and sanitizer.

“Mom always exaggerates,” Shen Yuan sighs. He hasn't even finished settling into his seat when Luo Chengle jumps into his lap. “Aiya, honey. Are you nervous?”

The driver gets in and starts the car. From Shen Yuan's apartment to Shunyi District, it's no more than half an hour, forty minutes with traffic.

“I don't like moms,” Luo Chengle mutters. He is now hugging a cute stuffed tiger, perhaps a little too big to carry around, but Shen Yuan assumes that he chose it precisely so he could hug it and glare at everyone like a devil doll through the stripes on the plush animal. “Moms are rude and mean.”

“Not my mom, most of the time,” explains Shen Yuan. He unlocks his phone, opening the family group chat in search of one of the photos. He finds a photo of his mother and father, together with Jiu-ge at dinner a month ago, and zooms in on his mother's face. “She's my mom.”

“She's pretty,” says Luo Chengle, and Shen Yuan can't help but laugh.

“Oh, she is,” he hums. His mom has the kind of face of an old-fashioned beauty, elegant, beautifully aged even in the single neat line of gray hair. Shen Yuan doesn't think he looks so much like her, at least not like Ming-ge or Meimei. “Many, many years ago, she was a model who lived on very little, like your Uncle Airplane, working very, very hard to get ahead. Then she met my dad,” and he moves the photo to show the man next to her, "who had a big heritage but no idea what to do with it. Dad would always go see her at her presentations and speak highly of her in his circles to get her jobs because he wanted to court her. It didn't take long for Mom to fall deeply in love with him, and even though it was scandalous, they got married. And do you know what she did?"

“What did she do, what did she do?” Luo Chengle looks curiously. Shen Yuan smiles broadly.

“She did *business*,” he hums. "She got Dad to invest in businesses she saw as successful. The businesses were very successful, and their fortune and fame grew. Then, with twice as much money as when they started, they founded their own company, but they continued to invest, buy, open offices, finance, and hold many charity events to help people who didn't have much. She always made sure that my siblings and I knew that having a lot didn't make us special or different, just lucky. We never lacked anything, but she always made us aware that there were many people who did, and to think much more about them than about ourselves.”

Shen Yuan is sure he can say this with absolute pride. His father had always been gentler, a little more passive than his mother; he had trusted her, her ambitions, her projects, and her mind. And his mother had proven herself equal to the task. Shen Yuan assumes that he has to respect not only his mother, but also his father. Not just any man of that era would have allowed not only a woman, but a model, to manage almost all of his newlywed fortune.

“Wow,” Luo Chengle says with a look of amazement. He continues to stare at the photo with wide eyes. “She doesn't sound like a bad mom.”

“She's not,” Shen Yuan hums, a little cheerfully. Even if he didn't spend much time with his family, and even if family meals with his mother were sometimes quite stressful, Shen Yuan loved her very much and knew with absolute certainty that he was a beloved son. “You'll like her. I promise.”

Luo Chengle makes a sound that doesn't seem to agree entirely.

“And doesn't Yuan-ge's dad have any other women?” Chengle asks, finally.

Shen Yuan shakes a little with laughter.

“Mom would *never* allow it,” Shen Yuan says, tapping on his father's face on the pic. His face has more stoic and firm features, more similar to Jiu-ge's. Shen Yuan assumes that some of his mother's delicacy has seeped into the way his brother looks at those same features, and although he has no doubt that he is the son of both, he doesn't see much in his face that he can identify with: Shen Yuan is the one who most resembles Jiu-ge of all the brothers, even if his features are more rounded and softer like his mother's, but years of illness have left a clear scar on a face that could have been attractive; in some other life he could be pleasing to the eye, Shen Yuan supposes. “Anyway, Dad isn't... like that. Once he looked at Mom, it was as if no one else existed in the world. They're absolutely sickening in love and will probably make you feel uncomfortable,” and he pinches Luo Chengle's cheek a little to pull his face away from the screen. “They love each other very much.”

“That's nice,” Luo Chengle murmurs, but he doesn't seem to be anything other than sulky.

Shen Yuan hugs Chengle tightly with one arm. With his other hand, he continues searching for photos in his gallery.

“Look, this is the house we're going to,” he says, showing him some of the photos. “It's my family home. I grew up there.”

“Wow!” Luo Chengle now seems much, much more interested. Shen Yuan pats himself on the back for succeeding this time. “It looks like the houses where I'm from.”

“Yep,” Shen Yuan laughs a little as he moves on to the next images. When they added a new pavilion just because his mother wanted a more comfortable place with a view of the outdoor gardens, his father not only built her the pavilion she wanted while respecting the restored look of the house, but he also built another garden with a pond and pagoda so his mother could see it from her favorite sides of the house. In truth, Shen Yuan had never known adults so disgustingly in love. “The main structure is a *shiheyuan*, very, very old. It's been restored with all the modern things we like so much, like electricity and internet to watch your movies and anime,” and Chengle laughs when Shen Yuan tickles him on the sides. “It has two internal courtyards. There was a tree here when I was a child, but they removed it.”

“Why?”

And Shen Yuan has to really hold back from laughing.

“You see, when Ming-ge and Jiu-ge were very young, they were always competing, so they competed to see who could climb the tree higher...”

He tells the story in enough detail to keep Chengle entertained. When he finishes, recounting how Jiu-ge ended up with a broken arm and made Ming-ge basically his servant in “revenge” for more months than was medically recommended that he receive help—and every time Ming-ge wanted to rebel and oppose him, Jiu-ge would start complaining that his arm hurt a lot and that maybe they should go to the doctor again, manipulating him to have his servitude extended. They only have a short time left to go, and Shen Yuan lets Luo Chengle stare out the closed window, open-mouthed, at the huge houses, buildings, and even the expatriates with foreign features walking down the streets.

“I went to a bilingual school,” Shen Yuan explains to the boy, who continues to observe everything with his mouth open, his forehead almost pressed against the closed window. "Here, there are many people who don't speak the same language as us. When Ming-ge was born, my parents settled here so that he could have access to the best schools with the best language programs and extracurricular activities. Not long after, Jiu-ge arrived, and it was huge competition because Jiu-ge was a year ahead and they shared classes. Mom always says that if they had fought less and studied more, they would have gotten better grades."

“Don't they hate each other?” Chengle asks suddenly. Shen Yuan lets the boy settle down next to him, almost curled up, hugging his stuffed tiger. “They fight a lot. But don't they hate each other?”

“Nope,” Shen Yuan shakes his head. "I know it seems that way. But Ming-ge and Jiu-ge love each other, even if they don't show it. Look, not long ago, Ming-ge was very sick from a virus he caught abroad, and Jiu-ge basically moved into his apartment for the entire recovery period to take care of him. He didn't let any nurses do it. It was his decision. And Ming-ge could always fight with Jiu-ge when they were kids, but when anyone else bothered him, Ming-ge always ran to beat them up."

Chengle nods. His little mouth pouts thoughtfully. Shen Yuan assumes it's something the boy simply has to think about, considering his own experiences. He doesn't want to delve too deeply into something he doesn't know—it's not as if Shen Yuan knows whether those harem brothers really loved or hated Chengle, but he assumes anything works if it makes him feel better.

“I'll tell you a secret,” he says, lowering his voice a little. The word secret, as always, makes Chengle's eyes sparkle with burning curiosity. "A lot of the time, no one was really bothering Jiu-ge. Sometimes he would get into trouble first and hit others because they were bothering or being rude with the only friend of Jiu-ge, but Ming-ge always misunderstood everything and ran to beat everyone up. And Jiu-ge never said anything to him, because he never wanted Ming-ge to know that he was the one who started the fights."

“Wow!” Luo Chengle almost bounced out of his seat with excitement. “I'll keep it a secret!”

“What a good boy,” Shen Yuan patted him happily on the head.

Finally, they arrived.

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Shen Yuan knows he shouldn't play with fire. He's just come out of a string of really bad days, but the moment Luo Chengle climbs on top of him to get out of the car, nothing in his body actually hurts. This rarely happens, so he accepts the driver's help to carry his handbag and Chengle's backpack and stuffed tiger, and walks into the house with Luo Chengle hugging his neck, his legs wrapped around his hips like a spider monkey. In his free hand, his cane doesn't even touch the ground.

It's probably the best he's ever felt in his life.

Luo Chengle's face is buried deep in his shoulder. Shen Yuan hums happily as they enter. He respectfully greets his mother's maids, who, as expected, smell of cleaning sanitizer, and is suddenly surrounded by “Excuse me, young master Shen,” “watch your shoes, young master,” “watch the step, young master.”

“The lady bought slippers for the little master,” says one of the maids, handing Shen Yuan a pair that are approximately Chengle's size. In fact, he thinks they will be just a little too big for him. “She didn't know his size, young master. Apologies.”

Shen Yuan accepts the chair that is moved in his direction and takes a seat. Accustomed to excessive pampering, he lets the employees help him take off his shoes and put the slippers in front of him, but he can take care of Chengle himself. He unties the laces of his sneakers, and his little feet are wearing socks that, only then, Shen Yuan notices are mismatched.

“Chengle,” he murmurs, pinching the boy's big toe. Then he runs the edge of his fingernails along the sole of the boy's foot, making him squirm with laughter. “What did I say about mismatched socks?”

“But Yuan-ge!” the boy pouts. “Pink Sock and Sky-Blue Sock are friends. I couldn't leave one at home. It would feel bad!”

One of the maids makes a strange choking sound. Shen Yuan hopes the poor woman is okay.

“I understand,” Shen Yuan says, sighing. "It's okay. So Sky-Blue Sock and Pink Sock are in your backpack, right? Not lost in the washing machine?"

“Not in the washing machine! In the backpack!” Luo Chengle waves his legs in the air. “I brought them. They're friends. Like Chengle and Yanshi. Or Yuan-ge and Ai-plein. They play together and take care of each other!”

Shen Yuan sighs. Really, how can this child be so precious, so adorable? He puts him in his slippers, and now that Luo Chengle is standing, he seems to have noticed that he is no longer in his arms, and his joy is clouded with a look of disappointment. Still, Shen Yuan holds out his hand.

“This way, young master Shen and little master,” hums an employee. Shen Yuan has known her for years and bows respectfully. “The lady is waiting for you in the back garden to take some fresh air of today's good weather.”

Of course, Luo Chengle is not as amazed by the old structure as he might have been if it were a modern mansion. Still, his sweet, curious eyes follow the circular arches, the woodwork, the stone carvings, and even linger on the spot where Shen Yuan remembered the tree where Jiu-ge fell so many years ago. Now, in its place, there is only a stone statue of a traditional dragon and aesthetic feng shui decorations.

Shen Yuan knows his mother is waiting for him. What he certainly doesn't expect is for her to jump up from her seat immediately. She is wearing a two-piece suit with a traditional collar and light blue pants covered in embroidery. Before Shen Yuan has a chance to back away, his mother approaches him and gives him a big hug.

“Look at you, you're so thin!” is the first thing out of her mouth. She pinches his cheeks, and Shen Yuan sighs. "At least you're not as skinny as the last time I saw you. You're eating well, aren't you? Real meals. Yes, yes. Your hair is shiny, you have a better complexion, so it's good food” and then she leans over to where Luo Chengle has squeezed in, hugging Shen Yuan's leg and still looking at her with a little suspicion. “And you must be the sweet child. What's your name, dear? I'm Xiao Jinlian, but you can call me Nainai.”

“*Mom*,” Shen Yuan warns. Chengle doesn't back away as Shen Yuan had thought he would at the affectionate offer, which is better than nothing. He looks up to find Shen Yuan's face, and only when he nods does Luo Chengle let go of his leg, taking a couple of tiny steps to bow formally.

“This is Chengle. It's an honor to meet Yuan-ge's mother,” he says in a low voice. When he raises his head, he immediately turns to look at Shen Yuan, who smiles encouragingly at him.

His mother, of course, has no modesty whatsoever. She carefully drops to her knees and extends her arms toward Chengle.

"Oh, you're such a beautiful baby. Come here, let me see you,” and she practically pulls him over to look at him closely. Luo Chengle lets her do it without putting up much resistance. “Look at that hair. Darling, it's so shiny. And that skin! It's so pretty, so soft. You're a very beautiful boy, very pretty. Are you eating enough, sweetie? I know kids like you don't like vegetables, but are you eating enough, sweetie? It's important for children to eat them to grow up healthy and strong."

Luo Chengle's cheeks are as pink as his ears. Shen Yuan refrains from laughing in a way that might hurt his poor child's feelings, so he just steps forward to stand beside him, patting his little head.

“Mom,” he repeats, his voice warning. “Don't tease Chengle. He's shy.”

“I like vegetables,” Luo Chengle replies a moment later, when he plucks up the courage. Shen Yuan smiles as he talks a little more, encouraged by his pats. “I like broccoli. And tiny carrots! And peas. They're my favorites. With rice with seeds and chicken. But chicken that isn't dry. I don't like too dry chicken.”

“Well, well,” and his mother, bless her knees, has no problem standing up. She holds out her hand to Luo Chengle, who, as seems to be his habit now, looks to Shen Yuan for approval

before accepting it. "Then I'll get you a plate of peas all to yourself today. I'm pretty sure none of my maids will cook any dry chicken, but I'll remind them. And what else do you like, dear? Tell nainai more."

Shen Yuan hopes to follow them, ready to intervene if Luo Chengle says anything that sounds even remotely like a harem, three hundred wives for his father emperor, but he is approached so quickly that he almost stumbles.

"Follow me," and the fleeting blur pushes him through the next open door. Shen Jiu looks at him with a rather hostile expression behind his glasses, but Shen Yuan doesn't really care at all. Just like Shen Mingsu, it's his default expression, like all the Shen brothers. According to Meimei, Shen Yuan's default expression is a typical resting bitch face, but it's not as if he agrees with that. "Where did you get that kid?"

"I missed you too, of course." Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. "That haircut suits you, much better than the previous one. Ah, yes, I've handled the change in climate well, thanks for asking. How are your old bones handling the humidity, Jiu-ge? How did the move go? Did your cat's kidney problems improve, or is she still on special food?"

"*Answer me*," Shen Jiu demands. He crosses his arms, standing in front of the door. Shen Yuan sighs.

"I already told you, he's a friend's son," he shrugs. There is no window nearby where he can see where Chengle is, or if he even continued talking calmly with his mother. Damn, he hopes Luo Chengle doesn't see that he's far away. Really, this child and his separation anxiety...

"Yes, that's what you told me." Shen Jiu opens his jacket, pulling a stack of papers in a manila envelope from the inside pocket and pushing them toward Shen Yuan. "Luo Chengle. Six years old. Birthday on February twenty-two. Born in Luoyang in Henan province. Birth certificate, main documentation, passport, vaccination records, main medical records. *Who the hell* is his father?"

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

"Luo Binghe," he says. Shen Jiu grimaces in disgusted disbelief. "Yes, *I know*, it's not a joke. He has the same name as that character in the stupid novel Meimei gossiped to you that I read. Yes, that's why we became friends on the internet. Can you let me go now?"

"Where is he now?" he demands. Shen Yuan sighs again.

"I don't *know*," he says. In fact, that's all he should say, but when he opens his mouth, he suddenly realizes he can't close it. It's as if a huge amount of frustrated words are pouring out of his mouth, bumping into each other one after another. "I don't know. *I don't know*! Do you think I haven't asked myself that question over and *over* again? He should be *fucking* here! He should have literally shown up the first night running because he lost the most beautiful and tender and gentle child and not just left me to deal with it! He should have been *fucking responsible*! He should have been fucking here *weeks* ago, and I shouldn't have to be taking care of his son! And Jiu-ge, don't get me wrong, *I love him* and I'd give my fucking life for

Chengle. Spend five minutes with him and tell me you wouldn't do the same. But. His. Dad. Is. Fucking. Not. Here. He's *not*! And this sweet little boy thinks that neither his father nor his mother loves him and that no one will come for him!”

His breathing is erratic; a vein throbs in his forehead, and it's as if all he can perceive for a long moment is the heavy beating of his heart. In front of him, there is no judgment or mockery in Shen Jiu's eyes as he expected. His eyebrow is only raised at one end, and the twitch of his mouth could almost look like the beginning of a not-so-unfriendly smile.

“I understand,” Shen Jiu says. And then, he taps on the papers with one of his fingernails, a little longer than his mother considers appropriate—but just right when Shen Jiu resumes his guqin practice, tapping on the manila envelopes. "So, I did the right thing in legally registering him as your son. Congratulations. You've given mother her first grandchild. She'll be *unbearable* about it."

“*What*?”

“I had a feeling. Come on. Let's go before that kid gets mother to put the family business in his name,” Shen Jiu says casually. He shrugs, leaving Shen Yuan to rummage through the papers with trembling hands. Yes, there is a *Luo* there, a Luo N/N listed as the mother without further details. The family name burning with dark characters on the paper is Shen.

Shen Chengle.

Shen Yuan has to cling to the wall, clutching the documents to his chest as he forces himself to remember to breathe.

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

The rest of the visit to Shen's house is much quieter. Shen Yuan introduces Luo Chengle to his father, who with a silent smile just pats him on the head affably. He doesn't say much more than that he is clearly a tall and strong boy, but that is enough by the standards of what he usually says.

Luo Chengle does not leave Shen Yuan's side at any point. Even when he walks alongside his Meimei or his mother, he doesn't seem very interested in straying too far from wherever Shen Yuan is, returning to him with little things—from oddly shaped wooden sticks, smooth stones, a bright red fallen leaf, a weed flower that he picked only when “nainai” told him that, anyway, the gardener would have to get rid of it if she left it there among the weeds. Shen Yuan carefully picks up each of the little things.

Luo Chengle is also not very fond of being surrounded by many people. He looks at Shen Jiu with a strange expression, as if trying to identify something in him, and avoids him with much more distrust than Ming-ge or Meimei. Shen Yuan supposes it makes sense—even if he doesn't look much like his father, it's true that Shen Jiu and he are the most alike of all the siblings, in his mother's eyes. That's what he's been told his whole life, so Shen Yuan believes it must be strange for Chengle to see a face similar to his Yuan-ge's wearing a hostile, calculating expression, looking even at the sweet and adorable Chengle with an inescapable venom in his eyes.

At this point in his life, it's also no surprise to Shen Yuan that, despite it being a typical family gathering (or perhaps precisely because it is), Yue-ge is also there.

“Ah, so that's the little one,” he hums, as Luo Chengle runs past to give Shen Yuan a pretty stone and then runs back to the artificial pond, where he seems to be fighting with the koi fish from the shore. Yue Qi is a year older than Jiu-ge, and Shen Yuan has seen him at every family dinner, every Christmas, every New Year, and every family birthday for the past ten years at least. Yue-ge really takes being such a close roommate that he seems like family to another level, Shen Yuan supposes. "Ah, Xiao Yuan, it's a pleasure to see you looking so healthy, unlike a few months ago. How have you been?"

“Much better today than other days,” Shen Yuan smiles cheerfully as Yue-ge pats him warmly on the shoulder. “And you? How did the move go? Did A-Ying get better? I asked Jiu-ge, but he dodged my question. I hope she's okay.”

“Ah, she was just nervous about the move. Getting used to a new space always stresses cats out. She stopped eating and her kidneys suffered,” and like a proud cat parent, Yue-ge pulls out his phone, starting to show him several photos of A-Ying. The Siamese cat wears the cone of shame in several photos, but she looks much better, even if one of her paws is shaved and she looks like she hates everyone. A proud and appropriate pet for Jiu-ge, Shen Yuan supposes. “She's much better now.”

“A waste of money, that's what she is,” mutters Shen Jiu, approaching from behind. The cup in his hand probably doesn't even have tea in it, even though it's not even noon yet. “This girl sees that I have expenses that aren't her fixing up the apartment and finishing all the damn refurbishments, and there she goes, wanting to be the center of attention.”

“Ah, Xiao Jiu is always so mean to our girl,” says Yue-ge, with a sweet smile. Shen Yuan supposes it must be interesting to see his brother's ridiculous gap moe – the surly bitch softening with concern for the domestic cat who is too spoiled to be a mere cat. Although it's not as if Shen Jiu is the only one who spoils her: even their mother often calls her ‘*her cute little granddaughter’*.

“If I were mean to her, she wouldn't have an entire wall to herself. I don't understand what you're complaining about,” Shen Jiu complains, rolling his eyes. Shen Yuan sees the way he shifts his weight from one foot to the other, the tension in his back, and decides to step aside. He is fully aware of the signs of nicotine withdrawal in his brother, with a lifetime of experience to recognize it, and he won't punish him by staying by his side to force him to endure it.

“If you're going to smoke, do it where Mom can't see you,” he points to where she is on her fancy deck chair on the pagoda, talking animatedly with Chengle. Chengle seems to be telling her a story, gesturing with expressions and hands—and from the way he's telling it, Shen Yuan assumes he's telling him about his trip to the zoo. “She always goes mad when you smoke.”

“She smoked until you were born,” Shen Jiu complains, but shrugs. He looks away from Shen Yuan with a complicated expression on his face. “Actually, I'm trying to quit.”

“Wow,” Shen Yuan can't help but be amazed by this. It's not like Shen Jiu was a man of vices —Shen Yuan only knew, as far as he knew, that he smoked and drank more than a glass of wine usually. It seemed that he had made big changes in his life lately: adopting a cat a year ago had been the beginning. After that, he had simply moved to a larger apartment a little further from the center in a nice residential area next to Yue-ge, and spent much less time at the company and more time organizing charity galas, making himself seen. Or, well, at least Shen Yuan had thought that he had just been making himself seen, not that his cold brother's heart had suddenly softened to the point of truly wanting to help others. “And what is the reason for this miracle?”

“Fuck you,” Shen Jiu muttered, rolling his eyes and pushing him with one hand on his back. “You little shit. Can't you be like Mom and say, ‘congratulations’ or something?”

“Congratulations on not ruining your lungs any further, really,” Shen Yuan taps his own chest. “You don't want to end up as an old, ruined man in a wheelchair with oxygen tubes because your lungs say, ‘*hey, I don't want to oxygenate anymore*.’”

Shen Jiu rolls his eyes. Visibly a little uncomfortable, Yue Qi laughs softly.

“Actually,” he murmurs, as always interceding to avoid any kind of dispute. His expression is kind, warm. “Xiao Jiu and I have been thinking about adoption.”

“Another cat? Didn't you say that A-Ying was jealous and possessive?” Shen Yuan snorts. Shen Jiu seems ready to respond with some insult (and Shen Yuan isn't sure if it's directed at him or Yue Qi for airing his secrets), but just then he can hear Chengle running toward him.

“Yuan-ge! Yuan-ge!” The boy skids a little, stumbling and only avoiding a face-plant because Shen Yuan steps forward, extending his arms to catch him. Then, abruptly, Shen Yuan almost stumbles when the boy pulls his hand, making him walk beside him. “Nainai wants to see all the pics! Of tigers! And pandas! And pretty statues at the zoo!”

“Careful, baby,” Shen Yuan says, laughing, letting the boy drag him along, now walking much slower. His mother pats the small empty space on the deck chair next to her, where Shen Yuan sighs, taking a seat and searching his phone. Chengle doesn't even need an invitation before climbing up to sit on Shen Yuan's lap, and Shen Yuan wraps an arm around him, making sure he doesn't fall.

“Aiya, let me see, let me see,” his mother says, reaching out her hands, taking the phone, and starting to scroll through the photos. Shen Yuan feels quite proud of himself for having removed all the questionable fanart from his gallery that would *definitely* make his mother look at him with disappointment. “Look at that cute little tiger. Isn't he the prettiest?”

Luo Chengle tells her about the stuffed tigers Shen Yuan bought for him, not as big or dangerous as real tigers, but Dawang Tiger could probably be very dangerous because he is huge and arrived in a giant box full of white balls that were surely his stuffed enemies in all those pieces, as a warning!

Shen Yuan can only laugh, hug Luo Chengle, and continue laughing at all his stories as the boy continues to tell his mother about his other tigers, about how some are softer and others

are tougher. He jumps off Shen Yuan's lap and runs to find a maid to retrieve his backpack and Dawang Tiger and show his nainai the tiger he brought, and only then does Shen Yuan realize that his mother has fallen silent, with a tender and pleasant smile on her lips.

“You seem happier,” she says suddenly, handing him back his phone. Shen Yuan is a little startled. On the screen is not one of the pic from the zoo or any subsequent ones, but a new photograph. There, Chengle has big bright eyes, a huge smile, and right behind him, Shen Yuan sees himself, hugging him, his face slightly hidden behind Chengle's high ponytail, but with the smile on his face visible in the curve of his eyes. “You should take more photos with him. You don't have any together.”

Shen Yuan supposes he should. When Luo Chengle returns with his little backpack to show his excited nainai his fluffy Dawang Tiger, Shen Yuan activates his front camera and teaches Luo Chengle how to take a selfie together. It's a little funny to see the boy excited in front of the camera, and even funnier when he can't stop moving, squealing excitedly with each photo, smiling, making faces, bringing his tiger to the camera, until Shen Yuan is sure he has at least twenty identical ones and at least fifteen of them will be blurry.

He's never been a big fan of taking selfies or even opening his front camera, but with Luo Chengle by his side, his mother is right about that: he looks happier than ever.

Chapter End Notes

SY: So, Yue-ge has been coming to family events for the past ten years, he's lived with Jiu-ge for years, they have a cat together, they've moved to a bigger apartment, and Jiu-ge is quitting smoking and adopting healthier habits publicly
SY: Hmm. Yeah, Yue-ge must be a good roommate if despite moving out, Jiu-ge still chose to move in with Yue-ge anyway

Sorry, I wanted to work on Mama Shen's backstory, and my sister gave me some ideas. Papa Shen was already rich, but Mama Shen had a pretty rough time in her youth, but she had a good eye for business and when Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening-up happened in the late 70s she took full advantage of it to make the right investments and move between the right businesses, consolidating the Shen family as one of the richest
:B We love you so much, Mama Shen. Fight for your new favorite grandson!!!! :DD
You have something no Bingbong has: active neurons and the power of a grandmother
lol I was there researching cities/provinces where the Luo River currently flows because, yes, Shen Yuan was going to close that kid with some association with the Luo River as a nod to his father. Shen Yuan has complicated emotions because, on the one hand, his favorite character is - ON THE OTHER HAND, HE CAN'T TOLERATE THAT HE'S A BAD FATHER AND WILL FIGHT TOOTH AND NAIL FOR HIS BABY :P
And speaking of the devil, hehehehehe insert devil emoji here because I'm on my laptop and don't know where to put them from here lol

Every step Shen Yuan takes to acknowledge that Chengle is now *his* baby is one step closer to making me cry harder because my poor boys deserve to be happy I love them so much
Also, Shen Yuan, of course your brother moved to a bigger apartment and is quitting smoking to adopt another cat. Of course. Do you have brain cells just for decoration, my love?

AHHH, I really hope you liked the chapter!!! I really enjoyed the Shen family. I hope you enjoyed all of them and their Shen-anigans!!!! heheheheh :B YOU KNOW!!! Kudo-comment-interaction from a distance, thank you SO much for reading, for all your beautiful comments, thank you SO much for joining me throughout this entire week.
WOW. GUYS. WE DID IT!!!!!! I've earned the suffer-like-an-airplane milestone. I don't recommend the experience unless you're mentally sound (I'm clearly not)
I LOVE YOU SO MUCH, THANKS FOR READING, SEE YOU SOON, HUGS AND KISSES!!!!!

Chapter 8: Fourth week

Chapter Notes

> WOW, MORE THAN A WEEK? I'm also surprised, BUT EXCITED :3
> HEHEHEHEHEH 😈😈😈
> (THANKS TO THE PERSON WHO TOLD ME HOW TO PUT EMOJIS FROM MY LAPTOP, MWAH)
>
> BTW!! SOMEONE MADE THESE BEAUTIFUL DRAWINGS HERE AND HERE AND ME??? DEFINITELY CRYING. I think there's nothing that makes me happier and more tearful than seeing that someone liked my fic enough to draw it. I'm absolutely in love and crying. Thank you so much
>
> Chapter warnings: child hitting and mistreating other children, mentions of the human-stick thing, minor injuries and blood
>
> Enjoy the chapter!! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan is very sure he is having a nightmare.

Actually, it's not so much that the scene around him *is* like a nightmare: the walls of his childhood bedroom are familiar even in the dark. In fact, the only reason Shen Yuan is so sure he's having a nightmare is because he can't find Chengle in his bed, and this causes him a visceral, indescribable *fear*.

Even though a part of his brain understands it's a dream, he can't help but look for him. He hasn't hidden under the bed or in the closet. There's a high window when he leaves the room, so he can see clearly between the halls. The floor creaks beneath his stockinged feet.

“Chengle?” he calls. He doesn’t know why he’s so scared. He knows he’s dreaming, in some strange way. Why would Luo Chengle be in his dream, anyway? But at the same time, why wouldn’t he be? “Honey? Are you here?”

Shen Yuan continues searching. The air is cold and thick. In the distance, he can hear the wind howling through the trees.

Things are different in his childhood home. Only when he reaches the end of the hallway does Shen Yuan notice that, in the garden, the tall tree from which Shen Jiu fell when he was nine years old, sustaining a compound fracture in his arm is still there, rising with yellowed leaves. The lamps, when he looks closely, are old-fashioned, antique oil lamps typical of a museum.

“Chengle?!” he calls again, louder and louder. He can feel his heart pushing against his chest, his ribs. It’s as if he can hear himself, his heart racing, a paralyzing fear in every direction at once. Where is he? “Baby, will you stop hiding?”

Suddenly, there's a sharp, ugly sound. Shen Yuan almost trips over his own feet as he chases after it. The sob rises, too high-pitched, sending goosebumps all over his skin. Shen Yuan pushes open a door, falling into a hole so dark that, for a moment, he completely loses his sight.

Then the crying gets louder.

“*Chengle*?” he calls. It’s a dream, he thinks. It’s a dream, *it’s a dream.* He needs a lamp. Just thinking about it, concentrating on it, he finds an old oil lamp in his hand. Wouldn’t a damn flashlight be better, damn it? “Chengle, baby, are you there?”

The lamplight grows brighter. The hallways are familiar, *yet* unfamiliar. Shen Yuan can't see the sky, as if it were a roofed structure. Then, abruptly, he almost trips over two children.

“You can’t leave him locked in there!” a little girl is saying. Shen Yuan sees similar, yet different, features in her: thick hair, waves that don’t quite reach curls, styled in an elaborate coiffure with pearls and hairpins. She’s wearing a pale-yellow dress. She can’t be more than seven years old. “Father Emperor will find out. And he’ll punish you!”

“He never punishes me,” the boy mumbles. He’s older, too, wearing pale-yellow robes. He’s about ten, with straight black hair and dark eyes, rather hostile for a boy his age. He’s tall and lanky, with the incorrect proportions of a child just emerging from the girth of childhood that makes him grow all over. “I’m the *oldest*. Father Emperor’s firstborn. Mom says he’d never dare punish me.”

“Mom says Third Wife Sha talked to her,” the girl insists. Her face creases with worry. “That she put a knife to her neck. That she was rude and threatened her. That we should stop bothering Second Wife Liu’s son or she’d pay! I heard Mom say she was afraid Third Wife Sha would put something in her tea.”

“Bah,” the boy hums. “Mother gave Father Emperor a son first. Why is she the *Fifth* Wife? She should be the First Wife. First Wife Ning hasn’t even given him any children! If Mother were the First Wife, it would be better. We’d have more things then, Xian-mei!”

“I don’t know,” complains the little girl, Xian-mei. She doesn’t really look like a bad girl, from what Shen Yuan can see. She looks like a girl with a bad brother. “We have a lot of things. And we steal things from Cheng-di.”

The boy turns so fiercely in his face that the girl backs away, shrieking before he even does anything to her. She covers her face, and Shen Yuan immediately wants to reach out, trying to stop the boy. He can't, because it's clearly a dream, because his hand swims in the air, and the boy roughly pulls his sister's hair. A pile of pearls and hairpins fall to the floor, clattering.

“Don’t call him *that*!” the brother shrieks. “He. Is. Not. *Our*. *Brother*! It’s just you and me! Just mom’s child! The only and most important ones! There are *no more* brothers!”

The little girl hiccups and sobs, rubbing the tuft of her hair. She nods, bending down to pick up the pile of pearls on the floor, taking them one by one with her tiny fingers and cradling them in her free hand. She sobs, and flinches as her brother passes by, crushing several pearls under his feet.

“We don’t have any other brothers,” the boy insists, glaring angrily into a corner. “Not *him*. He’s just another dumb son of Father Emperor and another one of his stupid wives. He’ll *never* be our brother.”

Shen Yuan feels his hand trembling violently. When he reaches out, the lamp shines a little brighter. Over there, at the end of the corridor, is an opening – a closed door, blocked by a bench.

Shen Yuan rushes there at full speed.

Even if he can't touch the dream figures of the children, he throws the lamp aside and can pull off the bench blocking the door, even if the effort burns his arms and stings his fingers. He opens the door, with trembling hands, and the sobbing child returns a wide, watery-eyed stare.

“Yuan-ge?” Chengle asks in a faint voice, disheveled—his hair in untidy waves that don’t quite form curls—wearing only a thin layer of robes, and trembling. The tears on his face aren’t new, but Shen Yuan has never seen him so miserable, not even when he first approached him.

“Come here, baby,” Shen Yuan opens his arms, and Luo Chengle doesn’t even hesitate to throw himself into them. He cries harder as Shen Yuan comforts him, kisses his little head, and coos until the sweet little guy stops crying. Hiccups keep running through him, but Shen Yuan keeps cooing, holding him, rubbing his arms to give him some warmth. He doesn’t even think much about what, just that he has to keep him warm, and soon he’s tearing out of nowhere the same soft cloud blanket he first wrapped Chengle in.

The boy curls into a ball. He looks even smaller than Shen Yuan has ever seen him, maybe four or five.

“It’s just a nightmare, baby,” Shen Yuan hums, when the child stops sobbing, only hiccuping. “It’ll be okay. My sweet boy is just having a very bad dream.”

“Why is Yuan-ge here?” Chengle says. His face is utterly sad. “It’s *ugly*. Yuan-ge doesn’t belong where ugly things happen.”

“That’s backward,” Shen Yuan protests. It’s a dream, so it doesn’t take much for him to stand up and carry Luo Chengle with him in his arms. “My sweet boy doesn’t belong where ugly things happen. And if you think about ugly things, let me be with you so they’ll be better. Okay?”

Chengle nods, his eyes still brimming with tears.

The children have vanished from their sleep, even if the floor has been littered with loose pearls. Shen Yuan sighs, cooing to Luo Chengle as he retrieves the lamp and retraces his steps, trying to find his way back.

“I don’t like the palace,” Luo Chengle says softly. “It’s ugly. It’s cold, and there are always mean brothers everywhere.”

“We’ll get you more sweaters then,” Shen Yuan says, kissing his forehead. “And I’ll be with you to take care of those mean brothers. How does that sound?”

Chengle clings tighter to his neck, nodding his head. Shen Yuan thinks he's found his way back, pushing the door open with his foot.

What he doesn't expect is for both of them to fall. The sensation is icy, paralyzing. Shen Yuan gasps, steam escaping his mouth, but the feeling of falling remains in his stomach even though his feet are on solid ground. There's less light now: high, damp stone walls, the dripping of something, a strong smell of decay.

“*NO*!” and Luo Chengle shrieks, covering his face. “NO, NO! NOT HERE! I DON’T WANT HERE!”

Shen Yuan doesn't have to be a fucking soothsayer.

“Cover your face, baby. Close your eyes,” he whispers. He pulls the blanket up, covering Luo Chengle’s face, letting him curl up in his arms. He’s shaking like a leaf, and Shen Yuan squeezes him tighter, so tight he thinks the sweet boy might be in pain. If Chengle is in pain, he doesn’t complain, because his little arms cling to Shen Yuan even tighter.

The lamp in Shen Yuan's hand feels heavy; the light is fragile, barely reaching further than arm's length. The ground beneath his feet feels damp, sticky to his socks. There isn't much further to go, which means Shen Yuan has to turn around.

Behind him, Shen Yuan could understand why Luo Chengle had made the desperate decision to steal his father's sword and cross over to a completely different world. Reading it had been a gratifying experience: Luo Binghe had suffered too much and unjustly at the hands of that man. So why not enjoy that torture, why not watch him punished for every crime, every horrendous act? Every evil he had ever committed had been returned to Shen Qingqiu not tenfold, but a hundredfold.

See it… *Well*.

Shen Qingqiu is less than a man. Even if his lamp sheds little light, as if the darkness of the dungeon were too dark to be pierced by anything even remotely luminous, the shadowy silhouettes leave little to the imagination: the stumps are evident, the body dangling, chains encircling it, leaving it on the ground covered in dried-out dark stains. It’s cruel. It’s vile.

It's disgusting.

Shen Qingqiu wears a single, hollow expression on his face. His chest isn't moving; his one eye is empty. It takes Shen Yuan a moment to notice that what's dripping from his half-open mouth is also blood, and that the man in front of him is *dead*.

Instinctively, he covers his head more closely around Luo Chengle. He doesn't have to see this. He *never has to see any of this.* However, the more he sees Shen Qingqiu's blank face, with a small shred of recognition, he has an idea of *why* Luo Chengle has dragged him into this particular nightmare.

The resemblance is more than just a faint *similarity*. Shen Qingqiu's hair is a dirty, battered, black fall around him. With his hair cut short, his own brother only manages to elevate his features, making them more steadfast than sharp. If Shen Jiu had longer hair, his face would likely appear more elongated in contrast, his cheekbones would stand out more, and the striking resemblance between the scum villain Shen Qingqiu and Shen Jiu would be more than just a resemblance.

There are similar features that Shen Yuan can only see through years of observing his brother's face: the straight line of his brows, the exact way his mouth has a sharp double curve at the top lip. Just looking at it makes Shen Yuan feel *miserable*. He won't say that Shen Qingqiu didn't deserve to be harmed – it's true that every action has consequences, and abusing a child would *never* be something Shen Yuan could forgive – but seeing the striking resemblance between his brother and the scum villain makes him feel nauseated.

He takes a step back, sighing. It's only then, when the light changes direction, that he can see a different shadow into shadows, taller, bigger, and standing.

A shadow that has always been there. Standing silently, hidden in the darkness, watching.

The lamp falls from his hands, clattering to the floor. All light goes out.

"Yuan-ge?" and Luo Chengle squeezes closer into his embrace. Shen Yuan can feel his own heartbeat like the frantic fluttering of a hummingbird, the cold sweat on his neck. They have to get out of there *now,* but it's as if his legs have frozen. He can't move them. "Yuan-ge! Yuan-ge, what's happen? What's *wrong*?"

Shen Yuan opens his mouth. Not a word comes out; he just holds Chengle tighter, squeezes him more securely in his embrace. He's trembling. Shivering. His teeth are chattering.

"Yuan-ge?" The voice is even quieter. Tiny. Shen Yuan sees only darkness, feeling Luo Chengle's trembling body in his arms, the stench of death in the air, and the cold piercing his veins. And, just when he thought he couldn't be more terrified—

"Shizun."

Shen Yuan wakes up with a scream. Luo Chengle wakes up too, and they both look at each other with the same horrified recognition before Luo Chengle, a small, vulnerable baby, bursts into tears.

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It's Monday morning, and Luo Chengle doesn't seem to remember anything about the horrible nightmare, thankfully. Still, Shen Yuan hugs him, pampering him, showering him with little kisses on his forehead and cheeks that make the boy squirm, half resisting only for Shen Yuan to have to tickle him and practically demand to be in his arms all morning.

Shen Yuan doesn't mind pampering him the way his sweet boy deserves: he warms up his favorite buns with sweet soy milk for breakfast, puts on Totoro again and lets him stay close to him, receiving cuddles, hugs, both wrapped in a warm blanket. He reads him a story and sits down to draw some little draws for Chengle to color—and although he's not very good at drawing, Chengle loves doing things together, and colors his draws with the excitement of someone doing their favorite thing in the world.

Only at lunchtime does Luo Chengle seem a little more cheerful and active, far from his nervous and clingy attitude (although he has not stopped being clingy, demanding more hugs than other days, demanding to be by his side all the time).

Only then, when Shen Yuan can tear his eyes away from Chengle without feeling like the boy is going to cry from not having his full attention, can Shen Yuan relax, answer the pile of messages from Airplane and his siblings, and return to their little homey normality.

His muscles don't hurt at all, as if his bad days had never happened, but he's not going to get completely complacent after a very strong and rather aggressive relapse: he takes Chengle for a short walk, moving in cars when necessary. They eat cream cakes with fruit at a nearby cafe, and then he takes the boy to see a movie at the cinema, where he spends an hour and a half with the boy sitting next to him excitedly watching talking penguins do ridiculous nonsense while trying to stop an octopus from destroying the world. If Shen Yuan has any criticisms, they don't really matter given how happy Luo Chengle is when they leave the cinema.

They wander around a bit more, taking their time, window shopping and snooping around in a toy store where Shen Yuan has to explain to the boy about gender roles in this world—and Luo Chengle is sulking a lot because why are only girls supposed to have pretty pinky things? They head back to the apartment early, and upon entering, Shen Yuan feels a strange pricking sensation on the back of his neck, a tense feeling of nerves that makes him check here and there while he runs the bath so Chengle can change into something warm and comfortable.

He feels ridiculously paranoid, but he almost believes he had left the lights off when he left.

Shen Yuan guesses it was a mistake, or that he simply forgot to turn them off and registered having done so as usual. He mocks himself a little as he gathers some clean clothes for Luo Chengle; what the hell does he gain from being so ridiculously paranoid, as if he should be really scared of something? Yeah, Chengle probably dragged him into a nightmare. Aren't Heavenly Demons supposed to have some kind of inclination for dreams arts, anyway?

However, it is only when Luo Chengle is finishing his bath that Shen Yuan is sitting on the sofa, in the living room that seems too empty and not lit enough for there to be strange shadows in the corners, that Shen Yuan wonders *why* in Chengle's nightmare there was the dark, shadowy and clearly recognizable figure of Luo Binghe.

And how the *hell* could his sweet little boy bring, with such terror that it sent shivers of panic through his body, the vile, hateful way in which Luo Binghe could call to the Shizun that the boy shouldn't even associate or recognize with that dead figure at the bottom of the dungeon.

Or how it is that, in that awful nightmare, Shen Qingqiu was dead exactly as he was in the last horrible chapter that Chengle could never have witnessed.

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The week is passing in a particularly strange way.

It's not that Shen Yuan is afraid of sleep, really. Just… *well*. He has a fair amount of existential angst about what it means to be trapped in a nightmare; everything is still too unreal for his standards of peace of mind, and he has a hard time falling asleep.

Luckily, Luo Chengle doesn't seem to have nightmares anymore, and although he sometimes tosses and turns in his sleep, babbling, none of the things he mumbles seem potentially distressing. Shen Yuan makes sure to shower his boy with as many joyful things as possible, delicious meals, good company, and outings that he can replace those bitter memories with something pleasant.

By Wednesday, his pain returns. It's not so much, but *it's there.* It doesn't prevent him from moving, but perhaps because of the humidity and the onset of colder days approaching winter and the proximity of the first snowfalls, his muscles randomly protest with the slightest movements, and when he's on his feet for long periods of time, it's as if his legs begin to cramp and a stabbing pain flows down his spine. He even begins to feel an uncomfortable sensation when breathing, typical of the climate. He crosses his fingers that he won't have to call his nurse again, returns to his regular intake of pain medication, and promises the worried Chengle that everything will be okay.

Ming-ge comes to visit on Thursday, again uninvited, as if it's not unusual to see each other so often. He greets him abruptly and goes straight to Chengle to give him a pair of pajamas that Shen Yuan realizes aren't pajamas at all, but training clothes that are perfect for his size. They then spend the next hour training and playing, and when Ming-ge leaves after making sure Shen Yuan has a stocked pantry and enough food, Luo Chengle is still laughing excitedly.

Shen Yuan figures that when he's not being bullied by his annoying siblings, martial arts training can be fun for a kid. He starts looking into a nearby martial arts class—in fact, now that he has all the paperwork, he might *actually* be able to enroll Chengle in a good school. He's not entirely sure how the boy will cope with his separation anxiety from being away from Shen Yuan for several hours, especially given all the extracurricular activities children are expected to experience due to their level of rigor, but he thinks he can maybe test the waters with some kids' martial arts classes.

Find out about some martial arts places for children near his apartment. Find a wuguan not too far away that claims to teach wushu to children as young as five, with all the hype of promoting cultural values by preserving the rich and ancient legacy of the most ancient

martial arts, as well as instilling in children valuable skills such as discipline, strength, self-control, and autonomy over their own strength and body.

Shen Yuan thinks a trial class isn't bad. He talks to Chengle about it, offering it, and on Saturday afternoon, after playing in the park with Yanshi and Yanshi's mother excitedly tells Shen Yuan about the new recruiters who contacted her about her job profile because there's a suitable vacancy for her at a large, important multinational company, Shen Yuan takes Chengle to her practice class.

He turns out to be exceptionally good.

Luo Chengle arrives at the coach's wearing the pajamas Ming-ge gave him, and the coach gives him some placement tests to easily position him for sparring with ten-to twelve-year-olds who are at least two heads taller than him. As expected for such a strong and ferocious little boy surrounded by human children, Luo Chengle wins every single sparring match. He only loses to one of the older children, who, immediately after beating him, helps him to his feet and congratulates him for putting up a good fight. Luo Chengle's eyes shine so brightly they seem to be filled with stars.

Shen Yuan has pictures of *everything.* He sends at least ten of them to the family unit in a mad, excited succession, which triggers a huge argument between the siblings about how if Luo Chengle is doing martial arts for Ming-ge as a busybody, he should also be learning aesthetic arts from Jiu-ge. Jiu-ge then starts bombarding him with a ton of messages recommending music classes, poetry and calligraphy studios for children, and threats to stop Chengle from growing into an uneducated brute who only punches and can’t speak. That using words is more important than using fists.

Luo Chengle isn't *so* keen on learning poetry or anything like that but promises to try it. Then, since they're close, Shen Yuan decides they'll go to the supermarket to buy some fresh fruits and vegetables. It's not a particularly fun outing, Shen Yuan thinks, but Luo Chengle is quite happy after all, even if it's looking at all the huge boxes and going through the aisles while dragging a huge shopping cart. By the time he realizes he can ask, Shen Yuan is surrounded by "Yuan-ge, Yuan-ge! Can we have this?" at least twice in every aisle. Shen Yuan figures it's not a bad thing to indulge a few whims, loading his cart with a variety. From pre-made oatmeal to mix with milk to seasonal fruit, to a wide variety of baby carrots and bags of peas to cook and eat with rice, it's indeed a good buy.

So-

“Yuanyuan?” an unfamiliar voice asks from behind him. Shen Yuan turns from where he’s comparing which jam has the least artificial sugars while Chengle decides half an aisle away whether he wants honey flakes or colored cereal, curious—and when he does, it actually takes him a long moment to recognize the person standing in front of him. It’s been at least seven years since he last saw that face, but when he changes that young woman’s hair into a longer cut and places square glasses on her face, he suddenly recognizes her. Even if a few years have passed and she’s now clearly a happily married woman, judging by the baby in her arms, some things don’t really change.

“A-Shui,” he says, surprised. He hasn't kept many friends from school, but he's always gotten along well with the girl, who was perhaps a bit more nerdy than him. The last thing he'd heard about her was that she'd started studying programming. “Wow. This is a great surprise. How have you been?”

“I should be asking you that,” she complains. “I haven't seen you all this time. You've completely disappeared.”

“Ah, my health,” Shen Yuan shrugs, pointing at the cane in his hand. When he’d started on immunosuppressants, among other treatments, it had been easier to just… isolate himself a bit from all the things he could no longer do. Like having a normal life. “I tend to keep to myself.”

“Like a monk on a mountain,” and A-Shui rolls her eyes. The baby in her arms lets out a whimper, and A-Shui coos. “Oh, yeah, yeah. Sorry, Baobao doesn’t like the white lights here. They’re too bright.”

“Yes, they are,” Shen Yuan laughs, peeking out from between the blankets wrapped around the baby. Can’t be more than a few months old, with the little face wrinkled in clear disgust and a fluff of dark hair. “How cute.”

“Of course it’s,” A-Shui coos to the baby, a playful gleam on her face. The baby fusses again, squirming more, scrunching up that little face in displeasure. “Oh, my partner usually takes out of the crib to sleep *all* the time. This little devil has gotten used to sleeping in arms all the damn time, and when touches a crib, wakes up. One day it's going to drive me crazy.”

“I bet you do,” Shen Yuan finds himself laughing a little. He imagines it must be incredibly difficult to hold a baby all the time. “Is a girl or a boy?” he asks, curious. The baby is wearing a pale green blanket, and as far as Shen Yuan knows, green is a pretty gender-neutral color when it comes to babies.

“Boy,” A-Shui hums. There’s a slightly tired pride in her voice. “My little wooden horse. Although he’s more of a grumpy little fellow right now.”

Shen Yuan laughs softly. The baby continues to fuss, squirm, and try to cover his face. Shen Yuan puts his hand in the air above his head, blocking the direct light from falling on him, and the little baby blinks slowly, as if he doesn't understand why the ugly ceiling lights have suddenly stopped being bothersome.

Then the baby lets out a gurgle of laughter that reveals a wide, toothless grin.

“God, you still have that strange charm of yours, even with babies,” A-Shui laughs, almost complaining. “You were the only one who could get the unruly children to pay attention to their lessons. I always wondered why you didn’t want to be a teacher.”

“Are you kidding?” Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. “With my meds, the last thing I need is a bunch of kids who are walking virus farms. I could never have been a good teacher,” Shen Yuan shrugs. He’d been good at tutoring, but of course, like so much else at school, it had also been something he’d done for extra points and to get out of PE extracurriculars.

“What a tragedy! You would have been the only teacher capable of dealing with this kid. Even if he was born from me, has all the genetics of my partner who is another programming nerd like me. This sweet baby must have inherited all of our poor social skills, so either he needs a best friend or a kind teacher, otherwise he won’t survive school,” A-Shui complains, though her complaint is more like a mockery. Shen Yuan laughs. A-Shui, always so dramatic. “Oh, you want to carry him?”

“Huh?” Shen Yuan blinks, confused. “Uh, I’m not sure,” and he waves his cane, a warning in itself to anyone who might bring anything even remotely fragile near him.

“You’re not even using it now, so it’s a good day,” A-Shui insists, basically pushing the baby against him. Shen Yuan snorts, but his arms immediately go to support the baby, even leaving his cane leaning against the shopping cart. “That’s it. Support his head. And for the love of God, let me stretch out my arms. Gosh, I love my partner, but I literally won't let her go back to visit her parents' house no matter how sick her mother is. I can't do this me alone.”

Shen Yuan laughs a little. He holds the baby slightly tilted towards him, and now that he's using both hands to hold him, he can't cover his little eyes with either, so the baby wrinkles his face in annoyance. He doesn't exactly look like he's going to cry, but he doesn't look like *he won't* cry either.

“Just a moment,” A-Shui begs, her arms stretched out above her head. She begins to twirl them in the air, and her expression is so relieved that Shen Yuan can only pity her. “God, this arm was about to fall off. I was going to get a cramp.”

Shen Yuan laughs a little. As if infected by the laughter, the baby lets out a sound closer to a gurgle of laughter than a cry, and Shen Yuan rocks him a little. He really is heavy. He's a chubby, healthy little boy, with round cheeks and a cute little onesie with chibi dinosaurs on it. He's really quite a cuddly baby. Shen Yuan isn't too familiar with babies to know if it's standard for them all to look so chubby and cute, or if this one is just particularly chubby for his age.

Just then, like a summoned little devil, Shen Yuan can feel it approaching even before he hears it, due to the *freaking aura.* It's not as if it's a figment of his mind—suddenly, it's as if breathing is difficult. The baby squirms, whining a little more instead of laughing.

“*Yuan-ge?*” Chengle’s small voice, approaching, almost pierces his chest. He has a cereal box in his tiny hands, big angry eyes, and a trembling pout.

“Ah, baby,” Shen Yuan exhales. Luo Chengle approaches slowly, unlike when he used to run toward Shen Yuan. Now, each tiny step seems tense. His little hands grip the box so tightly that Shen Yuan is pretty sure the cereal box is ruined. “Come on. Have you chosen your cereal yet?”

Luo Chengle stares at him. He doesn't respond.

Just a short moment later, still in his low voice, Chengle asks, “What are you doing?”

“Ah, an old friend asked me to hold it for a moment.” Shen Yuan takes a small step toward Chengle, who, surprisingly, takes a step back. His eyes are wide, alarmed. “Don’t you want to say hello?”

“Well, well,” A-Shui hums. She’s throwing one of his arms out to the side and behind her head in an awkward elongation. Whatever’s healthier for her arms’ circulation, Shen Yuan supposes. “And this cute little one? Yuanyuan, do you have a son too?”

“Yes,” Shen Yuan says immediately. He doesn’t even think about the answer as A-Shui laughs, her face bright, clearly touched. “Chengle, darling. Come. I want to introduce you.”

Luo Chengle obeys, even if he looks like he wants to do anything other than get closer. His steps are still tiny. His hands have actually ruined the cereal box with how tightly he's gripping it.

“Chengle, this is A-Shui. She’s a friend from when I was very young and went to school,” he explains. Luo Chengle nods but doesn’t respond either. He doesn’t make any of his usual faces either. He doesn’t even seem to want to look Shen Yuan in the eye.

A-Shui leans towards the child.

“Oh, but you’re so pretty,” she hums, clearly happy and unaware. Shen Yuan supposes that, to anyone who doesn’t know Chengle, it’s clear the child just looks like a quiet, introverted little boy. “If Yuanyuan is your dad, you’re the luckiest kid.”

Chengle's little face twists. His lower lip trembles, and for a moment, Shen Yuan is sure the boy is going to burst into tears right then and there.

Chengle doesn't. He hardens his expression, pressing his lips into a thin line, and nods.

“Your dad just holds my baby for a moment,” A-Shui explains, perhaps sensing a bit of Chengle’s discomfort. It’s not too hard to notice, honestly. “My arms hurt. Don’t you like babies?”

“No,” Chengle says, so quickly that A-Shui laughs.

“My, my,” she laughs. She continues stretching her arms, and although the baby’s weight hasn’t changed, Shen Yuan feels his own arms are more fragile. He doesn’t know if he’s really trying or if the tension in the air is becoming so heavy that he can’t bear it. “But my baby is very cute. Don’t you like a very cute baby? Don’t you want to see him?”

“I don’t want to,” Chengle says, as quickly as before. He doesn’t even look up at Shen Yuan. The baby stirs in his arms, and he tries to rock him gently, but the tension coming from his own child almost makes him feel guilty.

A-Shui doesn't seem to consider Chengle's almost brusque responses as offensive or rude, as someone older than them probably would. She finishes stretching her arms and, looking much relieved, reaches out to retrieve her baby.

They say goodbye after exchanging numbers to get back in touch – A-Shui sounds excited to be able to introduce him to her partner. She also recommends one of the jams to Shen Yuan, explaining that it has the least artificial sugars and that the pediatrician even recommends it for toddlers over other options. When she walks off down another aisle, pushing a half-filled shopping cart with the fussy baby still leaning on it, Shen Yuan almost expects Chengle to relax. Or throw a tantrum. Or explode with jealousy. Any of those options are on the table.

Luo Chengle doesn't say anything, which is almost worse. He doesn't complain, doesn't even look in Shen Yuan's direction. He just throws the box roughly into the cart and holds his hand tightly, pressing himself against his side, very silent. What remains of the shopping spree is a silent tension. Shen Yuan can't get Chengle to say a single word or even get the boy to look at him.

Even when paying at the checkout, Shen Yuan can't get Luo Chengle to respond. He only shrugs when Shen Yuan offers him candy or asks him to pick out a chocolate bar. The boy clearly chooses one at random, shrugging when Shen Yuan asks him if he's sure he really wants that one.

Luo Chengle also doesn't speak when they're in the car on the way back. He doesn't speak as he helps unpack the groceries, he doesn't speak as he takes the bags while Shen Yuan opens the door to enter the house, carrying the bags himself with determination. However, the bags hit the table with too much force. And only a moment later, with the door half closed, Shen Yuan hears the crash of broken glass.

"*Chengle*!"

Shen Yuan runs as fast as he can to him. The boy is standing there, staring at the mess on the floor. Shen Yuan isn't quite sure if it was an accident or on purpose but judging by Luo Chengle's blank expression and the fact that the only thing that fell out of the bag was the jam, shattered into crystals and jelly all over the floor, it clearly doesn't seem to have been an accident.

"I don't like it," the boy says, his voice hollow. "I don't want it."

Shen Yuan sighs. He tries to put his hand on Chengle's head, but, surprisingly, Chengle slaps him away fiercely. *It hurts.* Not just physically.

"No!" the boy cries. "Don't touch me. I don't want you. I hate you! Yuan-ge is a liar! I don't want you anymore!"

"Chengle…" Shen Yuan tries again, but the boy squirms, moving away from his touch. Shen Yuan steps forward, trying to offer some comfort. "Please."

"No!" The boy continues to wriggle, dodging his grasp. When Shen Yuan manages to put a hand on his shoulder, trying to pull him away from the glass on the floor and into a hug, Chengle bursts into tears. "*No!*" he shrieks again. As if a dam has been breached, all his tears fall, and his little body shakes as if shaken by a storm. "No, no, no! I hate you! I hate you! You said it was just Chengle and you had a baby! No!"

Shen Yuan squats on the ground, unconcerned about the pain in his legs or knees, trying to be at the boy's level, trying to look him at the eyes.

“I didn’t replace Chengle,” he says, his voice firm. “You’re here. It’s just you and it’s just me. We’re home. I held an old friend’s baby, just for a moment.”

“But you *did* it!” Chengle cries even louder. “You were smiling! *Happy*! Now you’ll want other babies and replace me! I hate you!”

“Chengle,” Shen Yuan tries to speak a little louder, not quite raising his voice. “I don’t want any other babies. You’re *my* baby.”

“*No*!” Luo Chengle raises his voice again. The scream sounds so fierce, so devastated, that Shen Yuan can almost feel his heart burning. “I’m not! Yuan-ge will have other babies and forget about me and never want me again! Liar! I hate you!”

“Chengle,” Shen Yuan tries again, extending his hand to the child once more. It’s not the best option, especially when Luo Chengle slaps him away again.

It's also not a good option when he loses his balance, toppling to the side, instinctively reaching out to catch himself before he actually hits the ground. It's not even a fall per se, no more than losing his balance, and he only notices the sharp pain when Chengle's wailing is cut off by a stifled gasp, his eyes widening in horror.

Shen Yuan looks down at his hand, over the sticky glob of jelly, with an even wetter red stain beginning to spread between the broken glass.

“Oh,” he mutters. “Fuck.”

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

Disinfection and crystal removal are the worst part. By the time the ER doctor stitches him, he's already sprayed anesthetic on the area, so the five stitches aren't painful at all compared to the cleaning and disinfection process. The wound isn't that deep, just long, and a ridiculously loud alarm that got at least half of his gossipy neighbors to come over and ask if everything was okay because of the ambulance at the door.

Luo Chengle has been crying for almost no time.

“I’m sorry,” he stammers, over and over again. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I don’t hate Yuan-ge, Yuan-ge, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…”

Shen Yuan wipes his tears and comforts him until he stops crying. It takes even longer than the whole tantrum.

“Chengle,” he says, and the boy now looks at him with his big, beautiful, sad eyes, hurt and on the verge of shedding more tears. “I love you. I'll never replace you. You're *my* baby, can you believe me? Even if there are other babies, even if I talk to other children. There will never be anyone who can make me love you less. Do you trust me?”

He has to insist a little more. Repeat, promise, comfort Luo Chengle gently, reassure him that he is a loved, cherished, irreplaceable child. Shen Yuan is very certain that this isn't a wound he can erase in a day, or a week, or a month; he knows that the wound of feeling insufficient, sad, replaced is something that has haunted the little boy since before his mother's new baby was born, and it's something that will be with him for a long time. It is a wound, after all. It must be cared for and prevented from being infected.

Only when Luo Chengle really calms down his crying, drinks a lot of water, and eats a sweet to regulate his emotions after crying, (and right after Shen Yuan makes sure that the child knows that he is truly loved and is not being displaced by his mistakes and actions) does Shen Yuan sit Luo Chengle down in front of him seriously.

“What Chengle did was wrong,” he says, and Chengle shrinks back in his chair. “You broke something because of a tantrum. It’s okay to have tantrums. I understand that you’re little and your emotions are bigger than you sometimes,” he says. Chengle pouts shakily, shaking his little head up and down, completely agreeing with that. Shen Yuan is certain there’s nothing worse for a child than having so many emotions and not knowing how to regulate them. He’s aware that tantrums, though annoying for adults, are sometimes *necessary*. “I can accept that you have tantrums and need to express what you feel. That’s okay. What’s not right is breaking things that might have hurt you.”

“But I hurt Yuan-ge,” the boy murmurs, his eyes worried. Shen Yuan has his bandaged hand over his and extends it toward him, not hiding it.

“I won’t say it wasn’t Chengle’s fault,” Shen Yuan says, and the boy’s pout trembles even more. “But it was *also* my own fault. I should have been more careful. My priority was to keep you away from the glass so you wouldn’t get hurt. Just as I got hurt, you could have gotten hurt. And that was dangerous.”

Luo Chengle nods his little head. Shen Yuan feels a sharp pang of sadness in his chest. Even if he wants to spoil the child, to make him forget it ever happened, he knows it wouldn't be right.

“Is Yuan-ge going to punish me?” Chengle asks, his voice low. His eyes are shining with tears, but more than that, he doesn’t seem to want to talk Shen Yuan out of it. Shen Yuan assumes it’s already a lesson when the boy himself realizes that his actions warrant a reprimand.

“We’ll have a time-out,” he says. Luo Chengle tilts his head, curious nonetheless. “You did something potentially dangerous, and you need to reflect on it. So, I’ll put a chair facing the wall, and you’ll have to stand there and think about what you did. And I know. It’ll be ugly, and boring. But when you’ve thought about it a lot, we’ll talk about it, and then you’ll get cuddled and watch a movie. Is that okay?”

Luo Chengle nods.

“But that’s not a punishment,” he says, however. He seems both surprised and confused by Shen Yuan’s choice of reprimand. “Punishment is going to bed without food. Or being locked

in a room without toys. Or having my things taken away because I don't deserve them for being bad. Or being hit by the servants for being rude to the children they look after."

Shen Yuan feels his eyelid twitch.

"If I find out any adult hits you, I'll cut off their hand and make them swallow it," he threatens. Luo Chengle looks at him with a perplexed expression. "Now, my love. Time out."

Luo Chengle obeys without even a word or protest. He sits down on the chair Shen Yuan places facing the wall. Shen Yuan sets a silent timer for six minutes and sends a pic of his bandaged hand to Airplane.

ShenY: [image]

ShenY: Chengle threw a tantrum and broke a jar of jam. He was scared, but now he's in time-out, reflecting.

ShangHH: bro

ShangHH: if i had done that my mom would have thrown me by my hair into my room and locked me there for like 3 days until she wouldn't want to hit me when she saw my face

ShenY: For some reason, I'm not surprised at all.

ShenY: How about you coming to my next family reunion?

ShenY: I'm sure Mom will like you, and Chengle will have someone to play with.

Shen Yuan checks a couple of random things on his phone while he waits for the damn timer to run out. His sister asks about the housewarming party at Jiu-ge's new apartment on the family group, and Jiu-ge insists he's not having a damn party. There's more silly stuff—his dad asking who's attending the Christmas fundraising gala so he can confirm it to the event planner, and a reply that clearly sounds like it was written by Yue-ge saying to please have them both there. His mom clearly recognizes Yue-ge in the message too, because she insists again that Jiu-ge stop being such a fool and bring him into the group.

Shen Jiu never does it, but his mother has been insisting on it for years, and Shen Yuan assumes that just because his mother agrees to it, Jiu-ge doesn't do it.

Shen Yuan doesn't answer, unsure if Chengle would enjoy a boring event full of adults in suits. Even if it's an exceptional opportunity to take Chengle out in a cute little suit, he won't confirm such a thing without getting his opinion first.

He stares at the screen and does nothing else until the silent timer hits zero. Then, he goes with open arms to Luo Chengle, who without even hesitating jumps into his arms. He doesn't cry at first, but he apologizes again and again. Shen Yuan tells him how proud he is of him

until the boy finally cries again, and then he lulls him until his cries are only hiccups. More water and candies later, he rubs his back while Chengle promises not to break anything dangerous again and if he feels bad, and tell him so they can solve it together.

Shen Yuan isn't entirely sure he can be the best father in the world, but when he plays Lilo & Stitch and hugs Luo Chengle on his lap, the boy looks much, much better for crying. Free of the emotions that were hurting him, safe even in his own mind for a moment. There's no tension, no fear, no pain. He clings to Shen Yuan more like he just wants the hug as they share their moment together, and less like he's afraid Shen Yuan might let go.

Well, it's clear that Shen Yuan isn't going to let go anytime soon, so Luo Chengle has nothing to fear.

Chapter End Notes

SY: Ah, well, Chengle dragged me into a nightmare. What's the worst thing that can happen in a child's mind?
SY: *seeing the SQQ human stick that suspiciously resembles his brother + a Binghe who shouldn't be there* ... yeah, I'm going to shut the fuck up

Guys, I was SHAKING while writing Binghe's scene. WELCOME TO THE GAME AFTER LITERALLY EIGHT CHAPTERS. BINGHE, AS YOU'LL SEE, YOU NO LONGER HAVE PARENTAL RIGHTS HERE SO
Using the wise knowledge someone told me that in Chinese, pronouns are pronounced the same - Yeah, Shen Yuan definitely never realized that his high school best friend was a lesbian. But hey! She thought he was gay the whole time, even before Shen Yuan said anything, so I'd say they're even :P

Honestly, I was really debating whether to give Chengle a healthy punishment or not. I mean, I know he's not a bad kid, he's just fragile and unstable. But I had to stand firm (yea me too) and give SY a firm one because I believe there's a fundamental thing to be learned from healthy punishments: not only that there are certain behaviors that need to be corrected so children don't harm themselves or others, but so Chengle can experience that discipline and a lesson don't involve pain and suffering. Therefore, learning from his mistakes doesn't mean humiliating himself and suffering with them. Learning that correcting behavior doesn't involve pain helps even in adulthood, and then positively helps avoid embarrassment when correcting a mistake, and the humility to accept mistakes and learn from them. I mean, how beautiful respectful parenting is *cries loudly*

OH, YOU KNOW, THANK YOU FOR READING AND FOR CONTINUING TO JOIN ME ON THIS JOURNEY. WE'RE GOING FULLY FORWARD!!! SO!!!! Let's keep this going together. THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING!! AND I HOPE YOU REALLY LIKED THE CHAPTER!! Same as always, comments, kudos,

interactions, I'M HERE FOR YOU, let's continue on this crazy journey
SEE YOU SOON :3

Chapter 9: Week - ????

Chapter Notes

I AM. SO. EXCITED FOR THIS CHAPTER.
Hold on tight :3

Chapter warnings: stabbings, bleeding wounds, vomiting - medical emergency, chronic pain, dissociation. Mentions (hints of) painkiller dependency, anxiety/hints of untreated mental health issues, more internalized ableism

Enjoy the chapter :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan isn't aware that everything around him is a dream until he realizes how little control he has. It's a constant replay of memories: first, he's treating Luo Chengle, with the boy carelessly wounding his arms, crying, calling him servant. It's an almost terrifying sight now that Shen Yuan puts it in perspective: the boy, though healthy, looked thin and sad, haggard and far too pale. His messy hair had no shine, and his little eyes might as well have been hollow, joyless shadows.

Shen Yuan takes care of him. It's an almost automatic repetition of his own actions. He hides and tears down the posters and merchandise, orders food. His memory isn't exact or perfect, but he seems to dwell stupidly on details: his injured arms, the healing that feels eternal and painful, every beat of fear and bewilderment in his chest.

The food arrives. Chengle eats, too hungry.

Memories are like a rushing tide. Shen Yuan has never gone swimming in the sea, never been swept away by a wave, but he's sure it must feel similar: floating and being tossed uncontrollably from one side to the other.

Luo Chengle switches from calling him a servant to calling him Yuan-ge. He questions him about being a priest—and Shen Yuan has to accept that this is the narrative the boy will understand. He explains that there are stories in this world, and that he has admired Luo Binghe as the Emperor that he is. He is not a priest, yet the boy keeps calling him that for a time. Luo Chengle can’t seem to distinguish between fictional tales and the stories of real heroes yet, and Shen Yuan isn’t sure it’s appropriate for little Chengle to understand that the texts he and Luo Binghe both come from are… fictional.

So Shen Yuan becomes Yuan-ge, somewhere between learning to comb his hair, buying him clothes, teaching him how to tie his shoes, complimenting his drawings, watching movies with him, and patting him on the head. The first time Luo Chengle says it, it's in a tiny, hesitant voice, and Shen Yuan finds himself smiling stupidly. Then, Chengle repeats it all

day, and that night, Shen Yuan feels like every ache in his body is worth the joy growing inside that child.

They are specific memories, and not at the same time. It's a strange dream: it moves uncontrollably, erratically, from one side to the other. Shen Yuan is suddenly in the park, and Chengle is asking him if he will marry Yanshi's mother. Then they're at the market, then painting paper kites. Then they're at the zoo. Then he's in bed, shaking and crying in pain, and Chengle is a little bun of child crying in his arms, apologizing.

The memories—the dream—shift. They don't give him time to recover emotionally from one before he lands in another. He doesn't understand what's happening, but it's *painful.* His head hurts in a way it shouldn't, like the bad beginnings of a migraine, with nausea and tension in his neck. In the memory, Ming-ge is teaching Chengle how to kick, and when Chengle succeeds, the boy turns around with the happiest expression in the world, running toward him.

Shen Yuan holds his cane in his hand. He focuses on the cane. It's familiar, it's physical, he's holding it. *But* he's not holding it: there's no pain in his legs, or in his body, because *it's a dream*. It's a memory that turned into a dream.

Chengle throws himself at him, and before he can reach him, he vanishes. Ming-ge does too, as does Airplane, both slightly blurred figures with features not as bright or as well preserved in his memory as Chengle's sweet little face. And even he is gone.

His cane. Identify and hold an amulet, something physical, something in *control*. Shen Yuan is in a dream. It's *his* dream. He can control it and stop it before the pain gets worse. If he keeps this up, he's not too sure he'll wake up pain-free.

The room is empty now. Or it should be. Shen Yuan doesn't see it, but since it's his dream, he can identify it. It's like a shadow, a heavy feeling, as if someone had placed something too heavy on his mattress, sinking it to one side, sagging under gravity. Shen Yuan has his cane—which, while not real, is a good representation of reality, and by holding onto the knowledge—it's his dream, he can control it, he can wield it—

He manages to tear the room away.

It's like pulling back the blanket on a piece of furniture. But there's no piece of furniture underneath.

“Oh,” Shen Yuan says, and sighs. He slumps back against the sofa, completely certain that his legs aren’t going to hold him up any longer. “It’s you.”

“Shizun is a master of dreams,” says Luo Binghe. Because *it’s* Luo Binghe, in his imperial robes, his hands clasped behind his back. It’s not as if Shen Yuan is dreaming *about* Luo Binghe—not that he hasn’t before, how the hell could he *not?* Would he not dream about Luo Binghe if he was an almost obsessive PIDW reader on a daily basis? It would be perfectly normal for his subconscious to retain some lingering ideas and bring the Protagonist into his head.

But something about him is all too real. Everything in the dream, once Shen Yuan can identify it as part of the dream, feels like something he can use and manipulate. If he concentrates really hard, he might even be able to create a little Chengle as an emotional support to cuddle on his lap. But there is something firm, immovable about Luo Binghe.

He can't control it because Luo Binghe is not part of his dream.

He's real. He's there.

“Who are you calling Shizun” is all Shen Yuan can say, his mouth twisting. “No. I’ve spent a lot of time in hospitals doing nothing. I know how to have lucid dreams.”

“Lucid dreams,” Luo Binghe repeats. *Luo Binghe*. Because he *is* in his fucking dream. What the fuck? “This is a technique this Lord doesn’t know about. Would Shizun teach it to this Emperor?”

Shen Yuan looks up, unable to even understand.

Every word Luo Binghe uses is cold, sharp at the edges. It's clear that, even with his bombastic exaggeration of words to describe every detail, Airplane had fallen short: Luo Binghe speaks to him in a strange way. It burns icy, sharp at the edges, venomous. It's as if his tongue is coated in poison, and every word is designed to intoxicate him.

Just because he's standing at a considerable distance, just watching, doesn't make him any less dangerous.

“Who are you calling Shizun” Shen Yuan repeats, snorting. Then he shrugs. “This is what lucid dreams is. I’m aware it’s a dream. I can influence what happens. Or I can manipulate it.”

He tries to put on a show, which is…honestly, ridiculous. But just as he ripped off the cloth that covered and hid Luo Binghe, he does the same to the room. There's an uncomfortable tug, a strange sense of strain. It's no longer a tidal surge pulling him back and forth uncontrollably and regaining control of his own dream is like getting back on his feet after days of pain: costly, but returning his own sense of autonomy.

They're in the park now. The same park, the memory of Chengle feeding the ducks, but without the ducks and without Chengle. He's still sitting on the couch of his house, despite everything. It moved with him to the park, with the sun elusive between the clouds.

“The trees are poorly constructed,” Luo Binghe observes. There’s a tense venom in his voice, something harsh. Shen Yuan is quite certain that whatever the man is thinking, it’s not good for him. “They’re *unreal*. If Shizun wishes to teach this Lord anything, he should at least do it *well.*”

Shen Yuan looks at the trees. Yes, that's right. Once he focuses his gaze specifically on them, the distant ones are more like silhouettes, elusive blurs, a mass of irregular leaves. The closer ones are more *like* trees, but it's clear that the wood doesn't look like wood, with every detail

of the bark or irregularities. It's how trees might look to someone who has never seen a tree in person.

Shen Yuan stares at the leaves. As if swept by the wind, all the yellowish autumn leaves are tinged with a deep blue.

Luo Binghe tenses his posture. If he had previously been clearly feigning a more relaxed pose, something dark now invades his expression, his eyes following the way sleep settles, the autumn leaves of different shades of blue at his feet.

“It’s a dream,” Shen Yuan says, shrugging. The grass around him turns blue, as do the blurred leaves of the trees in the distance. “It doesn’t have to be real.”

“This Lord understands the Shizun’s teachings,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. How ridiculous.

Shen Yuan sighs. The ducks are in his dream now, though he's not entirely sure why. Ah, probably because he'd been thinking that Chengle would really like seeing everything in blue, just to see it differently? Luo Chengle had told him about the blue star fields, gardens with mist that could reflect the night sky, and when he walked among them, it was like stepping on stars…

Very beautiful and magical, of course, if Shen Yuan didn't know about the wife plot behind it. But he would maintain the child's innocence as much as he could.

One of the ducks quacks to Luo Binghe, noisily. Luo Binghe looks at it, and the duck vanishes at the same time that Shen Yuan feels a sharp pain in his head.

“Stop moving things in my dreams,” Shen Yuan orders, rubbing his forehead. “It hurts.”

Maybe it's the wrong choice of words.

“Hurts? Is Shizun going to talk to this Lord about hurt?” Luo Binghe crosses the space between them in abrupt strides. Shen Yuan can’t even speak, choked with an oppressive, visceral sensation. He recognizes it; it’s the same paralyzing sensation, the qi, but much, much darker, much more hostile. “This Lord has the absolute *right* to bring all kinds of hurt upon Shizun. Shizun, after all, has caused the greatest hurt by stealing this Lord’s son.”

Shen Yuan blinks once. Then, fuck it.

He swings his cane, and just as Luo Binghe gets too close, the base of the cane presses against his chest, stopping him. Luo Binghe's hands wrap around it, probably ready to break it, but it's just enough control for Shen Yuan to free himself from the suffocating choke of qi.

“*Your* son?” he hisses. Despite everything, the words burn against his throat. “Your son. *Your son!*” and an irrational laugh bursts from his throat. “Luo Binghe, what kind of man is so absolutely shameless as to call himself the *father* of a child he doesn’t even *care for*?”

Luo Binghe grimaces. His mouth curls into an unpleasant expression. His dark eyes seem bloodshot.

“This Lord–…”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Shen Yuan hisses. “You are the great and powerful Emperor of the Three Realms. Your harem of wives’ numbers in three digits. You have taken revenge and tortured all those who have defied you. There is no one more powerful than you, oh fuck, *I fucking know it.*” Shen Yuan pushes his cane harder, keeping Luo Binghe on the sidelines, at a safe distance. He doesn’t know if it’s because Shen Yuan has turned the cane into his amulet, but even if Luo Binghe’s hands tighten on it, he can’t break it. “You are a man who has fathered children who hate, compete, and harm one another. *Your* son, Chengle? Name *one* thing about him that only you know, and you haven’t seen in my dreams. Name *one* important thing about him that I don’t know about. I know more about him than you do, and I've only been caring for him for a *month*. What kind of father are you?”

Luo Binghe bares his teeth in a grimace so empty, sullen, and hollow that it's almost pathetic. There is no verbal response. His silence is the only answer.

Shen Yuan focuses, right among the ducks. Two of the ducks are replaced by two children.

“Which of all your wives are the children of? Xiao Gongzhu? One of the Qin sisters?” he asks. Luo Binghe shifts his gaze to the children in yellow, frozen in their actions. The boy pulling the girl’s hair, the girl covering her face but not defending herself. It’s clearly a recurring part of their routine.

Luo Binghe's expression tightens.

“Xiao Gongzhu,” he says. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

“I expected it,” he murmurs. He lets the stolen scene from another dream replay: the boy pulling the girl’s hair, yelling at her. Every hateful word, every hostile look, filled with venom. “I don’t blame the boy. I want to blame him, you know? But he’s a *kid*. He doesn’t know what he’s doing, he can’t possibly have a concept that harm he does is harm if it’s something he’s allowed and urged to do. It’s his mother who’s probably putting those things into his head. And they’re talking about Chengle, by the way. The boy locked him in a broom closet, and I don’t think that was the first or only time.”

The little girl bends down again to pick up the pearls that have fallen to the ground in the blue grass. This time, the ducks approach, pecking around her. The little girl doesn't react; she just keeps hiccuping, picking up the tiny pearls with her tiny, trembling fingers.

The two children fade away with a sharp pain in Shen Yuan's head.

“Stop interfering in my dreams,” he hisses. Luo Binghe doesn’t even react, staring with a dark, hostile gaze at the place where the children were. “Just because you’re Luo Binghe, you think you have the power to—…”

“This Lord understands Shizun’s threat,” Luo Binghe says, interrupting him sharply. “But Shizun underestimates this Lord if he thinks he’ll allow him to continue stealing his children. Luo Chengle is the son of this Lord and Liu Mingyan, whom Shizun *doesn’t want* to anger. He *belongs to me*.”

Shen Yuan has no idea exactly what's going on. He just fucking loses his mind.

Dreams are like that, he supposes. He hasn't had lucid dreams in a while, and when emotion pushes him viscerally, the first thing he notices is the sound before Luo Binghe gives way on the cane holding him back, almost collapsing on top of him. The large black eyes, so similar to Chengle's they hurt, are wide open in absolute horror just before his entire face curls into utter contempt.

Shen Yuan's cane has become a sword.

"*Shizun*," Luo Binghe's voice, wet with blood. The blood, an unreal red, drips onto the blue grass, rolling down the sword into Shen Yuan's trembling hands. "Always finding ways to hurt this Lord, aren't you? Showing your contempt. Gifting that affection to anyone but this Lord. Giving your concern away for free yet never caring about this Emperor. Oh, Shizun owes so much to this Lord. But don't worry, Shizun, you will have time to give back. *I'll find you*."

Shen Yuan feels the paralyzing pain before he can even comprehend what's happening. Luo Binghe doesn't have a sword in the dream—the only sword, in fact, is the one Shen Yuan is holding, soaked in blood. The strong metallic smell washes over him, and when he truly comprehends what's happening, a bubble of bloody laughter bursts from his own mouth because Luo Binghe, of course, doesn't need a sword to be lethal.

Luo Binghe's hand has sunk into his stomach. Even through his clothes, razor-sharp claws and even more. Luo Binghe's expression isn't filled with visceral hatred, however, as Shen Yuan would have expected. Shouldn't he be so filled with contempt? Being stabbed by someone as pathetic as Shen Yuan… well. Ah. It wasn't a good way to build a good relationship with the Protagonist or get on his good side.

But what else could Shen Yuan do when Luo Binghe *dared* to treat Chengle as an *object* of his own?

Shen Yuan feels the sharp, throbbing pain. Luo Binghe doesn't seem to be checking his organs for nothing: the stinging pain rises in his throat, and the feeling of suffocation overwhelms him. If he dies in a dream, can he die in real life? He can't die. Luo Chengle sleeps beside him, hugging him, he can't die, *he can't...*

"Shizun, what a surprise," Luo Binghe says. Although blood is dripping from his mouth, there isn't a single contortion of pain on his face. "Shizun doesn't have a golden core at all. This Lord has been arduously learning to track Shizun's golden core across the *worlds*, searching for where Shizun has hidden with the son he stole, and Shizun doesn't have one?"

Shen Yuan coughs blood. It splashes, shiny, against Luo Binghe's face, too close to his own.

"You've hidden yourself well, Shizun," Luo Binghe continues, his voice echoing with that sinister tone. "Such *sacrifice*. Sacrificing your own golden core, tearing it out to avoid being found. But you won't be able to hide forever. *No one* can hide from this Lord forever."

The pain grows, sharp, visceral. It burns like fire, like being consumed from within. Shen Yuan screams.

Then he wakes up.

Shen Yuan has a moment of absolute confusion before registering that the pain from the dream is still there, that he can't breathe, and that his throat is full of fluid.

He sits up as soon as he can. Even in the darkness, he can see that blood is pouring from his mouth. He's grateful that Chengle is still asleep, despite everything, as he drags himself out of bed, taking the blood-soiled blanket with him to the bathroom, grabbing his phone as he goes. He slumps against the toilet, vomiting blood again and again, dizzy. His ears ring, his throat burns. He feels over his stomach, hoping to find a gaping wound, sobbing in relief when he notices the skin is whole and there are no viscera leaking from some hole shaped like Luo Binghe's hand.

He cries, choked. The pain burns. The blood is red, too bright. His eyes burn in the bathroom light, his body trembles, almost in spasms.

Only when he has no more blood to vomit, shaking with what he can only identify as a fever, does he unlock his phone.

ShenY: 120

ShenY: Vomiting blood

ShenY: Pick up Chengle let YQ take care of him

ShenY: I don't want him in the hospital he'll get scared

SJ: We are on way there.

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Like every time in the hospital, time is an uneven blur from which he barely has any coherence or sense of self. His body no longer belongs to him: his body belongs to the ill; Shen Yuan is only a carrier, an elusive mind, the tiny being in a wandering mecha of flesh.

Shen Yuan loses track of how much is happening around him. They take his blood pressure, record his breathing, and his blood oxygen levels. Someone shouts hypovolemic shock, and an even larger number of doctors begin arriving from all sides. They cover his mouth, stick needles in, and draw blood for emergency tests. At one point, they block his throat, though the oxygen mask that follows is welcome.

Shen Jiu is at his side the whole time, disheveled, his glasses on his irritated eyes. He repeats over and over everything the doctors ask and demand to know about his condition,

mentioning his doctors, his treatments, his medications. There are general grimaces all around. Someone, somewhere, is demanding that a private room be set aside that has been thoroughly disinfected.

At some point, someone puts medication in his veins that completely wipes out the pain and consciousness, and Shen Yuan drifts off to sleep.

There is no Luo Binghe in this dream, thank God.

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He drifts in and out of consciousness. He barely registers sounds. Where is Chengle? Where is he? He struggles to understand what's happening.

Sometimes he wakes up to see Jiu-ge standing beside him. Other times, he wakes up to see a doctor. Everyone is talking, but their words sound distant, muffled. Shen Yuan is sure he faints at least once or twice.

He doesn't know how many days have passed since he truly woke up. The silence of the sterile white room is only interrupted by a constant, shrill beeping in the corner. There's a rigid blockage completely obstructing his throat, and no matter how hard he tries to make a sound, he can't even swallow properly. He doesn't despair. This isn't the first time he's woken up in this situation.

He struggles a little longer to find the strength to move. Shen Jiu is sitting on one side, probably asleep. He's wearing different clothes, his square glasses are sliding down his nose, his hair is unkempt. Shen Yuan struggles more than a little to muster the strength to knock on the bed rails with his knuckles enough times for Jiu-ge to open his eyes, startled.

All the alarm on his face turns to relief when he sees him awake.

“I hate you,” is the first thing Jiu-ge says. “You’re going to scare me to damn death. You fucking idiot.”

'I love you too,' Shen Yuan signs in the air, careful not to tug at the intravenous line in his arms, weakly rolling his eyes. He's not entirely sure he's fully understood, but he assumes Jiu-ge does. *'My baby?'*

He hasn't had the chance to pick out any kind of name sign to identify Chengle since he had not had the need to sign until now, but Jiu-ge understands exactly who he's talking about even without the need to.

“Chengle is at home with Qi-ge,” Shen Jiu says, sighing. “I’ll call your doctor. They did an endoscopy and cauterized you.”

Shen Yuan focuses his eyes on the white light from the ceiling until they hurt.

'My baby?' he asks again. Shen Jiu rolls his eyes.

“He’s a crybaby,” Shen Jiu says. “He’s always asking about you. He barely wants to play, and A-Ying always lies on him when he’s lying face down on some rug. He made us swear that we would bring him to see you when you really woke up, and he wanted Qi-ge to take him out to find flowers with some strange name so you would wake up. He only ate because that friend of yours said if he didn’t eat, you would get sad.”

Shen Yuan doesn't just feel his pulse race: he literally hears it. The beeping of the machine is shrill, and even Shen Jiu is startled.

'What friend' Shen Yuan asks, so quickly that his hands tremble. *'What friend,'* he insists.

“The one he calls Uncle Ai-Something,” and Shen Jiu, despite his obvious concern, rolls his eyes. “Seriously. He doesn’t even call me uncle. You need to teach that son of yours better.”

Shen Yuan allows his breathing to return to normal, relaxing. The shrill ringing eases. Shen Jiu watches him with the clear expression of someone at least five or six steps ahead of him.

“His father hasn’t come looking for him,” Jiu-ge says, and Shen Yuan feels another tension relax in his shoulders. “I hadn’t believed you’d *actually* kidnapped him.”

'I don’t,' Shen Yuan says. His hand trembles. *'I found him. He was alone. I know his father. My baby was mistreated, and I won't let his father take him where he was unhappy.'*

Jiu-ge sighs. He pinches the bridge of his nose, clearly too tired to respond verbally.

A doctor finally enters. Shen Yuan listens with all the medical jargon, tuning in and out to nod or shake his head at the few yes-or-no questions. The doctor explains with his usual dispassionate medical composure: active gastric ulcer, emergency endoscopy, cauterization of the lesion to stop the bleeding, blood transfusion. He's been under observation for the past three days and will probably need to remain hospitalized for two more days. Although, since he's awake, they'll be able to remove the endotracheal tube.

The doctor explains that he will need to continue treatment with proton pump inhibitors for the next few weeks, tapering his dose over the following months. They will schedule another follow-up endoscopy in approximately six weeks to check the healing status and ensure there is no risk of further bleeding.

Shen Yuan will need relative rest and a bland diet for at least the next two weeks: no irritating foods, alcohol, coffee, or fatty foods. In the following days, he should limit himself to light broths and liquid diets and completely protect his stomach.

…which means completely adjusting all his medications. His main doctor will need to review and reduce all his doses: not just immunosuppressants and corticosteroids, but also *completely remove* all painkillers. The doctor probably sees the panic in his eyes when he says this, so he simply insists it could have cost him *his life.* Self-medication is *dangerous*, even with clinically prescribed medications.

“When you’re discharged, you’re going to need close monitoring with both gastroenterology and rheumatology, and honestly,” the doctor gives him a distinctly stern look, the typical

disappointed look some doctors have when Shen Yuan comes in with something really serious and they agree that the problem *wouldn't* have been so bad if he'd done things like use a wheelchair or eat healthy, "I'm going to refer you to mental health to help you manage your relationship with your painkillers before you become fully dependent."

The doctor leaves. Shen Yuan stares at the white lights on the ceiling until he sees red dots in his vision and his eyes burn.

"Did you hear that right, idiot?" Jiu-ge says from beside him. He sounds more frustrated than angry. "I'd slap you. You could have *died*."

Shen Yuan waves his hands in the air. He struggles, but the *'I'm not crazy'* actually makes Shen Jiu slap his hand. It stings.

"Be thankful your friend answered every damn thing right away," Shen Jiu continues hissing. Each word sounds more like the high-pitched hiss of a cat, but Shen Yuan guesses it's because his head is trying to dissociate. "He was at your house for like less than a week and saw you take at least ten pills a day. Are you dumb? Or are you stupid? Do you *like* being stupid? Do you want to *die*? If you're in pain, *you* need to learn how to use support, you asshole. Accept your fucking reality and stop giving up on it. You're *ill*. You know it. *We know it*. You need to learn to live with it and stop being an insufferable bitch wanting to do the same things as everyone else just because other people can. You *can't*. And it's fucking *okay* that you can't, you little shit. You don't have to adapt to the fucking environment, your environment has to *adapt* to you. You have the fucking money and the *support* to do it. *Accept that you need help* and stop fucking around."

Shen Yuan closes his eyes. He can see the flashes of light still bursting through his closed eyelids. He can also feel the tears running down his face.

Shen Jiu leaves with a slam of the door.

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When Chengle comes to see him, it's after Shen Yuan has been disconnected from the larger machines and most of the tubes except for the main line, and it's with tears. Luo Chengle cries, Shen Yuan cries, and even a nurse behind them cries, although she pretends not to. Shen Yuan has Chengle sit on his lap in the wheelchair, hugs him closely, soothes his crying, and praises him for being brave in the hoarse, broken voice he barely recognizes as his own.

Chengle hugs him tightly. He begs him not to leave. That he was very scared—that he doesn't want to lose him. Shen Yuan swears it. It takes at least fifteen minutes to calm the boy's crying, and another ten minutes just to get Luo Chengle to share with him things he's done these past few days: Jiu-ge apparently let him sleep in the Surprise Room, which is a pretty room with walls painted a soft pale green and filled with toys and a bunch of kids' stuff that Shen Yuan has no idea why his brother has in his house, and Uncle Yue made him lots of homemade food that didn't taste as good as Ayi's but was warm and delicious. Uncle Yue read him stories too, and Jiu-ge complained a lot about why he was Jiu-ge and not Uncle Jiu.

Chengle confesses that he finds Jiu-ge's face a little funny when he gets angry, so he says it like that because it's funny and he knows he'll get angry. Shen Yuan can't help but laugh into his hair and hug him tightly.

Shen Yuan feels at peace. He hugs Chengle a lot and almost cries when the sweet scent of his hair changes from using a different shampoo. All he wants is to go home, take a nice bath, bathe and comb Chengle until his curls no longer look untidy from poor styling, and wrap them both in a warm blanket until the world around them disappears.

Airplane also comes to visit, a day later. He gets slapped by Shen Yuan and apologizes repeatedly for telling Shen Jiu about the meds—*but hey, how could he not?* And Shen Yuan can't even get mad at him for it.

“It’s not for the meds,” he says, sighing. He’d been too terrified to even think about it, scared, *horrified* that thinking about it too much could *bring him on*, as if summoning him. “Luo Binghe entered my dreams and attacked me.”

Airplane looks at him as if he's gone crazy.

“When you say *Luo Binghe,* we’re talking about, I mean, you know…” he begins to babble. Shen Yuan sighs more deeply. His throat hurts less, and while it’s still difficult for him to swallow, it’s honestly much less painful than the sharp pain that’s slowly stinging through his entire body.

“Yes,” he says. “He was… he accused me of stealing his son,” he says. He struggles to retain much. Like all dreams, images are elusive, even if it was a vivid one. “He talked about Chengle like he was an object of his property. I got angry. Let’s just say we argued, and he attacked me. He dug his hand into my stomach, and he said something like he was looking for my golden core to track me through, but I don’t have one.” He places his hand on his stomach. There’s no scar on his skin, and though he still wakes up terrified by the sensation of skin tearing and the sharp pain, this time both remain in the dream. “He was shocked by that. He keeps calling me Shizun.”

“Uh,” Airplane said, his face pale, almost sickly. “Well. Uh. You’re *definitely* not the most similar of your brothers, but you do have a certain something…” He lowers his volume when Shen Yuan gives him a hostile look. “Well, I guess, you know, if it’s the Luo Binghe from the end, uh, he’s a little… unstable.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. He’s genuinely tired. “Yeah. I know.”

The two of them are silent for a while. Shen Yuan watches outside, where Chengle has gone for a short run in the hospital internal garden. Shen Yuan missed the first snowfall, so now the ground is covered in a thin layer of frost. While Jiu-ge runs errands, Yue-ge stands with Chengle, entertaining the boy as they throw snowballs and run around. Luo Chengle runs and rolls in the snow, wearing a windbreaker over what looks like half his sweater closet, because he looks so fluffy. His laughter is joyful and sweet, and all Shen Yuan can feel is the weight of a rock in his chest.

“I’m scared,” he admits. Airplane hesitates, but pats him on the back a couple of times. He seems nervous and tense about initiating physical contact, but Shen Yuan doesn’t blame him. He looks like shit. “When Luo Binghe comes to take him away, he *will*. In his twisted mind, Chengle is his property. And I can’t go with them. Not now. No…” He points at himself, up and down. “Not like this. I won't survive a day.”

Airplane doesn't say anything. He seems thoughtful, though. Then, when he speaks, his voice is so low that Shen Yuan has a hard time hearing him.

“You can tell him he owes you,” Airplane says. Shen Yuan looks at him, eyes narrowed, curious. “I mean. You took care of his son, uh, for a whole month. He repaid your kindness with cruelty, look at you,” and Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. “I mean. Luo Binghe repays tenfold the good, tenfold the bad. You did something good for him, but he repaid you with something bad. It’s a debt.”

“So what?” Shen Yuan stammers. “I’m Rumpelstiltskin now? You owe me, give me your son in payment? He will kill me.”

“No, no, I mean,” Airplane seems on edge. “I mean. Uh. You can use that to your advantage, I don’t know. You’re smart than me, Cucumber-bro, I’m sure you know better than I do how the hell to use that.”

Shen Yuan sighs. He's actually too tired to think about it. He's too tired to care. He just wants to be discharged, go home, and spoil Chengle. He wants to go back a week, two weeks, to when his biggest concern was how to make the sweet boy happy, not how to keep him by his side.

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The idea of Airplane is crazy. But Airplane is, after all, the creator of *that* crazy universe. The creator of Luo Binghe. If anyone can know by what standards the Protagonist operates, it's definitely his creator, and Shen Yuan finds himself thinking about it way too much.

He also *knows* that Luo Binghe is already in this world.

He doesn't know exactly *how* he knows. He hasn't had dreams, hasn't had any kind of strange mystical thing. But it's something… Shen Yuan just knows. He feels it like dark coils crawling up his spine when he's alone in the hospital room, like a stinging sensation against his throat, choking in his chest. He feels watched. He checks his stomach obsessively for scars, and the burning that accompanies him when he wakes lingers in his nightmares.

On the day he is discharged, Shen Yuan makes a decision.

“I need to go home alone tonight,” he says. Shen Jiu gives him the worst look he’s given him since he refused the wheelchair. His muscles don’t hurt enough yet to require it, and he’s grateful that Shen Jiu would lend him plenty of warm clothes, probably suspecting that none of Shen Yuan’s clothes are warm enough for outside in the snow with his recent hospitalization. Shen Yuan can only agree with him: he doesn’t usually even get out of his

bed when it snows. “I have to clean up the blood. Change the sheets. No one has lets the cleaning Ayi in all this time, so it must be a mess. I don’t want Chengle to see that.”

Shen Jiu is reluctant, but Shen Yuan insists a few more times on the need for Chengle's mental health and to spare him unnecessary trauma. He also insists that it would be better for the boy to return home rather than from the hospital to the house, to return to a stable, orderly place. So Jiu-ge writes to Yue-ge to explain to Chengle that Shen Yuan will be spending 'another night in the hospital', and Shen Yuan calls to say they can meet tomorrow in home, and lets Shen Jiu drive him to the door of his apartment, where he stays there only the minimum necessary before Shen Yuan practically begs to be able to take care of everything quickly, because he is very tired and really wants to get things done and cleaned before going to sleep.

Shen Jiu leaves. He also slams the door, clearly annoyed. Shen Yuan knows the extent of his disapproval: he's never been good at offering help or showing his concern in normal ways, and Shen Yuan has never been good at asking for it. He supposes he should be grateful that at least Shen Jiu hasn't decided to stay despite everything.

Shen Yuan slumps against the sofa. He feels his muscles tremble and twitch even though he's only made the briefest trip from the car to the elevator and from the elevator to the apartment. With the help of his cane, he moves into the bedroom and turns on the light, expecting to see the mess. He stands there, hand trembling on the cane, legs aching, eyes dry, and throat raw, staring at the clean floor.

The bed is spotless, made as neatly as it's ever been, with the sheets tucked into the wooden bed frame. All of Chengle's stuffed animals are stacked next to each other, except for his favorite tigers and the larger Totoro, which Yue-ge probably took with the boy the night he was admitted to the hospital.

The floor smells like soap.

Luo Binghe sits in his desk chair.

“I’m not doing this right now,” Shen Yuan says, before Luo Binghe can even say a word. “I literally *can’t* do this right now. Wake me up when the sun comes up.”

“Where is *my* son?” Luo Binghe says. His voice is even worse than the one in his dream. Shen Yuan takes a step forward, and stupidly, his leg gives way. He falls sideways, gasping from the pain of both the blow and the cane digging into his side. His eyes fill with tears.

“Safe,” is all he says. He struggles to his feet, trembling. It burns. It burns in his muscles, in his bones. For a moment, he has the ridiculous, stupid feeling that *it’s* Luo Binghe who’s torturing him. That he’s somehow managed to get his blood parasites inside him, that he’s making them bite and pierce, that he’ll pierce his stomach and reopen the wound, and Shen Yuan won’t be able to call anyone so as not to put anyone at risk, and he’ll die there and…

“Where *is he*?” Luo Binghe repeats.

Shen Yuan manages to stand. He's trembling and continues to tremble with every step until he reaches the bed. He sits there, forcing himself to breathe deeply, his hand on his stomach. There's no wound. *There's no wound*. He's not going to die. He repeats this to himself until he feels his breathing normalize.

Luo Binghe isn't patient. He stands up, and when Shen Yuan raises the cane slightly on instinct, Luo Binghe now grabs it and throws it to the side. Shen Yuan hears the thud and just prays it hasn't broken, because otherwise he has no idea how he'll get out of bed in the morning.

“Shizun, this Lord has not been clear enough.” Luo Binghe stands there, leaning over him. His eyes are the red of freshly spilled blood, the red zuiyin on his forehead seeming to extend outward, menacing lines creeping across his skin in a domineering manner. “Where did Shizun *hide* my son? If Shizun answers, this Lord will be *kind*. Shizun will not suffer for daring to take something from this Emperor.”

Shen Yuan feels his vision is unfocused. His breathing catches for just a moment, and for that instant, he thinks he's going to faint. It's too much for his mind. It's too much for him.

But he can't faint. If he faints, Luo Binghe could do anything. He'd find his cell phone—because he is, after all, a smart protagonist—and figure out how to use it and how to get Jiuge to bring Chengle over. And then he'd take him. Shen Yuan can't faint. Shen Yuan *needs* to be in his own mind, thinking quickly and smartly.

“*Kind*?” he says. Luo Binghe looks at him with a sneer that could *almost be* a hateful smile. “I’ve been taking care of Chengle for *weeks,* and the kindness you repay me with is *sending me* to the hospital? You’ve opened a hole in my stomach. *I almost die*. Is that what Emperor Binghe does? Does he return kindness with cruelty, after all? The stories about him must be *lying*. If Binghe treats those who are kind without expecting anything in return so cruelly, let alone whose care his own children, I fear the Emperor is nothing but *scum*.”

Shen Yuan expects the attack. Luo Binghe puts a hand on his neck, a threat, but he doesn't squeeze. Only there, where his huge, *clawed hand*, too cold, can he feel the sharp thump of his heart against his jugular. Shen Yuan can feel it too. The panic he feels would make any pathetic animal see him as prey. Probably even Luo Binghe sees him as one.

“A drop of kindness is rewarded with a torrent,” he says, despite his dread. “Is this Luo Binghe’s kindness?”

The hand lets go.

“What does Shizun want?” he says. It’s as if a mask has covered his face. Suddenly, the visceral hatred, the contempt, is masked by a nauseating charm, because *it works*. His smile curves in a way that shouldn’t be real, and when he speaks, the gallantry of his mouth is poison. “A new golden core, perhaps? The solution to his curse, the cure for his illness? Jewels, lands? His sect back? These libraries of Shizun’s are filled with monstrous creatures. Does he desire a vast monster palace like the one he took *my* son to? With what can this Emperor repay the *great kindness* Shizun has shown this Lord’s son?”

Shen Yuan could laugh. He's sure it's a hysterical laugh that seems about to burst from his mouth. Luo Binghe is a huge, almost spectral form, with an unreal charm, a face so falsely feigned that it's believable. Yet there are shadows of exhaustion about him. Shen Yuan recognizes them. He recognizes the shadows under his eyes, the sharpness of his high cheekbones. There's no shine to his hair, and it's not even combed except for a stray, tangled braid on one side.

Luo Binghe doesn't look like he's been having a good time while his son is missing either. If it had been any other case, if he didn't know the pain of his hand, Shen Yuan would certainly feel even more pity for him.

But given his current circumstances, he only has one chance. And he's not going to waste it.

“Have a seat,” he says. Luo Binghe looks at him with excessive distrust even with that charmingly fake smile, but he does it again. In his elegant demeanor, Shen Yuan’s desk chair even looks like a throne. “We have *much* to discuss.”

Chapter End Notes

SY: It's okay, if I get hurt in a dream there are no consequences in real life
SY, waking up: ...fuck

SY: I swear it's not the meds' fault, I was actually stabbed in a dream
SJ, calling psychiatry: ...it's okay, continue

I missed the baby Chengle in the chapter too, don't worry TwT
I wanted to add one or two more scenes with Chengle, but I actually decided not to because it's a distressing and decisive episode for our Shen Yuan. I also wanted to emphasize how much he missed Chengle and that, despite him being almost gone, he's become the main driving force behind his worries, actions, and decisions :'D That's just me being gay and whiny, sorry

Also, I don't really know how Chinese sign language works, but in the sign language I know, names aren't spoken letter by letter, but rather each person is assigned an individual name sign. I mean, yes, they could be said letter by letter, but it's complex and honestly a waste of time. So the signs assigned to a person have the meaning of that specific person. In this case, Shen Yuan has never chosen one for Chengle before, so he's using the 'baby' sign for Chengle—totally appropriate for me it's his baby
Someone had to yell at Shen Yuan, and it felt appropriate that it was Shen Jiu, you know? :B Our Jiu-ge has gone through some pretty decent character development in his new life. He's a good brother who doesn't manage his mood or temper well, but he's still a good brother who never wants to lose anyone he loves (again)

BINGHE HAS ARRIVED AND UNFORTUNATELY HE'S HERE TO STAY, I'M SO SORRY (guys, I'm still dying laughing. It's literally a bingyuan fic, and I feel like

Binghe's going to get booed at every single one of his appearances until someone hits him with a stick or he be bingmeificated, whichever comes first LOL) As always, sometimes I forget how creepy LBG canon can be, so I write him and just say "this bitch is scary" and I know I'm going in a good direction

WELL YOU KNOW THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING. I GENUINELY ENJOYED THIS CHAPTER LOL Here's all the action, drama, angst, and blood that Binghe's appearance brings. Never let Chengle find out that it was Bingge who sent Shen Yuan to the hospital, or he'll never forgive him. Also, did Shen Yuan go to the hospital because of Bingge, or because of his blatant meds use? Bet :B

I HOPE YOU LIKED THE CHAPTER. HUGS, KISSES, CONGRATS FOR REACHING WITH ME THIS FAR. I HOPE YOU'RE HAVING A BEAUTIFUL WEEKEND. YOU KNOW, I'M KUDO-COMMENT-INTERACTION AWAY. I LOVE YOU. LET'S KEEP ON THIS!!!! :3
SEE YOU SOON!!!!

Chapter 10: First day (and first night) out of the hospital

Chapter Notes

> You guys are going to boost my self-esteem. SO TERRORIZED OF BINGGE, I love you all. I'm SO glad I can properly convey his creepy bitch vibe :D
>
> Chapter warnings: post-hospitalization recovery, more internalized ableism, externally regulated medications, and refusal to acknowledge mental health issues
> (Compared to the previous chapter, I think things are going pretty smoothly right now lol)
>
> Enjoy the chapter!! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan wakes up with a feeling of exhaustion ravaging his entire body. It's even worse than a bad day: on a bad day, pain is pain, manageable and treatable. Tiredness isn't pain, but it feels like it is, because there's nothing to blame but his own body and his own being for behaving this way.

Even if he wants to stay in bed longer, he knows he has too short a morning for all the things he has to do before Chengle arrives.

First things first. He's glad his cane is back at his side, and unbroken. It would have been a bummer. So he stands up and, just after making sure the door can open and close normally, begins rummaging through Chengle's drawings. There are many that never made it onto the walls due to lack of space, and it pains him to pick out a few that are his specific favorites, but they are the necessary and obvious proof: Luo Chengle is safe, sound, and healthy.

He sends a series of photos of Luo Chengle to a nearby photo shop for express delivery. He arranges to send all the photos of him happy, with his dirty face eating, smiling broadly. He adds some of the boy training with both the coach and Ming-ge; he even adds his own selfie of himself hugging the happy boy at his mother's house.

All the photos he sends out for printing are physical evidence of a happy child. He probably adds more than necessary: a few blurry photos of Chengle playing with Yanshi and other children, a couple of photos of Chengle making silly faces at the camera, photos of Chengle with his giant stuffed tigers.

Luo Binghe is not *asleep* on the sofa, but the way his face is resting while in the lotus position is not too different.

Luo Binghe opens his eyes as soon as Shen Yuan sets foot in the room, looking at him with deep, unfathomable eyes.

“Good morning to you too. There’s no qi here,” he says. He struggles to speak in a normal voice yet; it’s still too early for what he should be resting right after leaving the hospital. “Meditating won’t do you any.”

“As if this Lord would sleep in a place inferior to–…”

“Yeah, sorry, I’d give up the bed for you, but I have to recover from, you know, you almost killing me,” Shen Yuan mumbles, patting his stomach allusively. Luo Binghe’s expression darkens, but Shen Yuan just sighs and throws him a tape measure and a small notebook with a pencil. “I don’t have the strength for this. Give me your measurements, I’ll buy you some clothes.”

“This Lord has perfectly good and functional clothes.”

Shen Yuan raises his eyebrow at him. The robes he's wearing are perfectly fine and functional, yes, but for the fictional Emperor of Xianxia era. There are at least six different layers of robes made of fabrics Shen Yuan can't imagine—silk, what imaginary creature they came from—a belt made of a hide suspiciously unlike any known animal, and he hasn't even taken off his boots to be inside the house. His mother would scream if she saw him.

Shen Yuan just hopes his protagonist's halo will protect his robes from being infected by any foreign viruses or pollen from PIDW. He definitely doesn't need that in his newly released, hospital-bound system after such a recent emergency medical procedure.

The more Luo Binghe is under his gaze, the more hostile he looks. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

“Of course,” he says, with a wide, fake smile. Luo Binghe’s expression is even more bitter. “But not for this world. Adapt or perish.”

Luo Binghe narrows his eyes, but accepts the tape measure. Shen Yuan leaves him taking the measurements and drags his own stupid weak muscles into the bathroom. He brushes his teeth and takes a shower sitting in his support chair, perhaps lingering a little longer under the hot water that, for a moment, actually makes his body feel like a body and not like defective material.

Then he rushes out the door, his hair still dripping over the shoulders of his sweater, when the doorbell rings. Luo Binghe, of course, makes no move to answer the door, and Shen Yuan exhales in relief when it's only the delivery man carrying his envelope with the printouts. He signs and gives a quick tip for the speed of the delivery before nearly collapsing against the door.

In passing, he picks up the tape measure and Binghe's measurements, which are resting on the coffee table. Luo Binghe doesn't even verbally acknowledge him, once again in his meditative posture, as if ignoring the world. Shen Yuan supposes it's better this way; Luo Binghe being quiet is less of a nuisance.

Once he has the photos, he picks up one of his more ink-like black pens (he already assumes full-color photographs are too much of a culture shock) and starts writing little things on the

back using traditional Chinese, relying on quick internet searches when he's not too sure how exactly certain characters are transcribed.

It's not exactly a letter, but specifications: *"Chengle playing with his friends in the park. He's adopted a best friend in a boy whom the others didn't want to play with." "Chengle with my brother. He's a martial arts enthusiast, and thanks to his corrections (gentle, even though he doesn't seem that way), Chengle was encouraged to go to a wuguan. He used to be very afraid of violence of all kinds, but he doesn't seem so afraid of it anymore." "At his first wuguan practice class. He won all his battles except one." "At the zoo. A zoo is a home for many species of animals for observation and sometimes the preservation of their species. He was safe the whole time." "He didn't grow animal ears; it's a headband with fake ears. But he's adorable." "None of these tigers he's hugging are real. He likes to hug them while taking a nap. His favorite is Dawang Tiger."*

Shen Yuan writes and writes on each of the photos, then carefully packs everything into a manila envelope large enough to fit Chengle's drawings without bending or wrinkling. He adds a note explaining that Luo Chengle arrived very scared, with a qi deviation, but it was controlled. That he has been safe and cared for this entire time.

Then he seals the envelope and goes to where Luo Binghe hasn't moved, like a damn giant creepy statue. Maybe, if he stays still a little longer, Shen Yuan might try selling him online as a limited-edition merchandise.

"I have something for you to give to Mingyan," he says, waving the envelope in his hand. Luo Binghe opens his eyes, his expression tense. "She must be devastated now. Chengle mentioned that she's been very sad since her new baby was born."

"Yes," Luo Binghe acknowledges. His expression is certainly hostile even when he's talking about a topic like that. In truth, he's beyond help. "A girl. Chenxue."

"Wow," Shen Yuan hums. "How much does she have now?"

"Six months," Luo Binghe says quickly. His eyes narrow even further.

"How many times have you seen *her*?"

"Shizun dares to imply that this Lord–…"

"Yes," Shen Yuan is blunt. He extends the manila envelope to Luo Binghe. The expression on his face is, frankly, terrifying. "Please give it to Mingyan. Look it over if you want."

Luo Binghe doesn't even need an invitation to open the envelope because he's doing it before Shen Yuan has even finished speaking, and Shen Yuan is glad that he isn't rough with either the paper or its contents. The first thing he pulls out is one of the drawings, and immediately, his brow furrows.

"What is this?" he asks. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

"A drawing," he quickly replies. "Chengle likes to draw."

Even if he answers, Luo Binghe doesn't seem to find the answer satisfactory. He takes out a few photos afterward, looking through them. Shen Yuan watches him.

He doesn't really know what he's hoping to see on Luo Binghe's face, and he knows it at the same time. Some stupid side of him, the side that still admired Luo Binghe's character, *was actually* hoping the man would soften his expression upon seeing the photographs. Some tenderness, some longing, some joy? To see the relief at seeing his son safe and sound, that he had been cared all this time?

None of that is on Luo Binghe's face. It's almost painful to look at him. When he seems to be checking for anything potentially threatening, he returns everything to the envelope with that same grim expression, brows furrowed, eyes deep in shadow. There's no positive emotion in him, no glimmer of affection even, only eyes wandering over the details, a tense expression curving the top of his mouth.

“Good,” Luo Binghe says. He reseals the envelope and stands up. Shen Yuan, out of self-preservation alone, grips his cane tighter. His entire arm trembles. “This Lord *thanks* Shizun for his consideration for this one’s wife and the mother of *his* child. His gifts will be delivered.”

“Now,” Shen Yuan says. Luo Binghe’s gaze darkens even further. “I need you to hand them over *now.* ”

“If Shizun wants to drive me away, he should know that–…”

“I know, I know,” Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. “This Lord can find you, blah, blah, blah, you can’t stop this Emperor, this mighty Lord will always find a way to get to Shizun and make him pay if he dares to trick this Venerable Demon Emperor,” Shen Yuan mimes, gesturing wildly with his free hand, drawing on all his experience from watching xianxia dramas. Teasing Luo Binghe probably isn’t the best way to get him to leave his apartment, but *he needs* him to leave, his leg is trembling, and he’s not going to sit on the sofa while Luo Binghe is still there. “It’s for Mingyan’s own good. She’s Chengle’s mom, and despite everything, I know that he loves her. He’s very sad about what he assumes is her rejection. Please, could you take them to him now so Mingyan can have peace of mind?”

Luo Binghe's mouth is set in a thin line. He tucks the envelope into his sleeve (and Shen Yuan can't help but wonder, how the *hell* do things created with qi work if there's no qi in this world, or at least not enough of it? Is there a point where it runs out, like a battery, and needs recharging? Or like an enchanted item, does it simply work without any external power source?) and, with a snap that sounds like hundreds of bones breaking, a sword appears, scything through the air, black and hostile, in his hand.

Shen Yuan looks at Xin Mo with his mouth twisted in disgust.

“I’ll be back, Shizun,” Luo Binghe says, just before opening a dark slit in the middle of his living room. The portal is sinister, a shadow darker than the night itself. It’s a vile, vile thing that sends goosebumps up his skin and makes him feel close to nausea.

Shen Yuan waves his free hand towards him, waving as if he were simply saying goodbye to someone leaving on a bus.

“See you,” he says. Luo Binghe disappears through the portal, which slowly closes behind him, and when the air clears of the suffocating, oppressive feeling, Shen Yuan actually lets himself fall onto the sofa, almost panting with how hard he tries to get the air circulating normally in his lungs.

It's just a little difficult. Then, with his phone in hand, he texts Airplane and Jiu-ge.

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The next time there's a knock at his door, Shen Yuan already knows who it is.

“Yuan-ge! Yuan-ge!” Chengle lunged at him so hard they both nearly fell. If it weren’t for Yue-ge holding his arm, he probably would have ended up sprawled on the ground.

“My baby,” Shen Yuan murmurs, leaning down to hug him and cover his face with small butterfly kisses. Luo Chengle embraces him with those painful hugs, and he trembles so much he looks like he might cry. “It’s all right, sweetheart. You’re home now.”

Jiu-ge and Yue-ge help him settle in. They unpack the stuffed animals and all the new clothes they bought for Chengle, absolute uncles who are incapable of not spoiling the child. Shen Yuan is completely fine with this, even if he thinks he should buy a new wardrobe.

In fact, he should buy more things. His apartment isn't particularly small—it's, in fact, quite large and comfortable, with a spacious bedroom, kitchen and dining area, a large living room, and a decent bathroom. It's just, *well*. It's a one-person apartment.

Maybe he should get a new place.

“I brought food,” Yue-ge says, taking some glass containers out of one of the bags he’s carrying. “I figured the food in your refrigerator would have gone bad by now.”

Shen Yuan has not eaten or checked the refrigerator for those same reasons.

“Thank you very much,” Shen Yuan looks through the containers. Clearly, some of them are for Chengle’s food—he can see noodles and broth, noodles with meatballs, and more. If he’s not mistaken, there’s even a fairly large quantity of frozen gyozas ready to be made. However, he also sees white broths that look too much like hospital food, which will likely be his only sustenance for the next few weeks.

Yue-ge is in charge of cleaning the refrigerator while Jiu-ge unpacks, folds, and puts away Chengle's things. Luo Chengle is telling Shen Yuan about a huge library they went to with Uncle Yue, and that it had a carpet with many beautiful pictures on the floor, a man told him and some other children a funny story doing all the voices of the characters and then Uncle Yue and Jiu-ge bought him many storybooks with so many drawings.

Only when Chengle is taking a bath does Shen Jiu sit down opposite him on the same chair Luo Binghe had been using as a sort of throne, and hands him a pair of tiny, square plastic

pillboxes. Exactly seven squares.

“Each of your doses is regulated,” he explains sternly. “Written inside each one is which pill to take at what time, by color and size. You can’t know what you’re taking or what effect it’s having.”

“And that's what a psychiatrist told you to tell me or…?” And before Shen Yuan can even finish speaking, Shen Jiu hits him on the forehead with his knuckle.

“Shut up,” he growls. He’s really pissed off, if Shen Yuan can see, because the blow really stung. “I’m still furious with you.”

Shen Yuan doesn't hesitate. He rubs his forehead, checks his dosage, and takes exactly what's indicated on the inside of the pillbox with a drink of water. Shen Jiu resolutely explains that he'll come weekly to organize his medications, and that he's already spoken to all his doctors, and they're all in agreement. He shouldn't skip or add any doses: his stomach *doesn't need* any more nonsense from him.

When Jiu-ge leaves the room to dispose of his emergency medications, Shen Yuan screams into a pillow. He doesn't need much to completely go hoarse, but the other option is to cry, and he doesn't have the energy for that. Then he leaves the pillbox in his drawer, sets alarms on his phone to remind himself of the specific times Shen Jiu has written down for him, and leaves his phone in his pocket so he doesn't miss a dose.

When Chengle comes out of the bathroom with his wet hair smelling of his baby shampoo, Shen Yuan covers his face with kisses. Then, while Yue-ge heats something for them to eat and Jiu-ge appears to be discussing some work on the phone in the other room, Shen Yuan gently dries Luo Chengle's head.

“I like home,” Chengle says, his voice soft. “Yuan-ge is the best.”

Shen Yuan squeezes him in another hug before continuing to dry his hair. He scrunches the curls with the towel, uses the hairdryer and the diffuser. His arms are shaking, they're already burning badly by the time he's done, but nothing's going to stop him. He uses the creams, defines the beautiful curls, and leaves Luo Chengle with the most beautiful, fluffy mane, the boy happy and joyful with his pretty curls bouncing from side to side.

Then the boy returns with one of the storybooks Yue-ge bought him and curls up beside him. He reads aloud to him in his sweet little voice, a little stumbling, a little confused sometimes, but Shen Yuan listens carefully, hugging him, praising him, and they reach the end of the fairytale just as Yue-ge brings some food onto the coffee table in the living room.

Shen Jiu is still arguing on the phone in the dining room.

“He’s stressed, I’m sorry,” Yue-ge apologizes, serving Shen Yuan a white, downright sad-looking broth. Chengle’s dish is much better, apparently with noodles laced with peanut sauce and meatballs. There are also peas and broccoli on the side. “It’s been a complicated few days for him, and there have been some bureaucratic complications while everything was going on.”

“I’m sorry,” Shen Yuan murmurs, sighing. He imagines it must not have been easy for any of them to take care of not only Chengle, but also Shen Yuan in one place so he could take back the care of his son.

“Ah, it’s nothing,” Yue-ge patted him on the shoulder. He let them eat in peace while he went to, presumably, give some moral support to Jiu-ge, who was still arguing. Whatever the argument was, it seemed like something more serious than just work, given the amount of foul language he’d started using and the threats of bringing his lawyer into the conversation, so Shen Yuan turned up the volume on the TV a little to distract Luo Chengle.

“Did you like having a room to yourself at your uncle’s house?” Shen Yuan asks. Chengle shakes his head quickly.

“Nu-uh,” he says, slurping noodles. “I like sleeping with Yuan-ge. Yuan-ge hugs me nicely and takes care of me when I have nightmares. If I wake up in the night and see Yuan-ge, I know everything will be okay.”

Despite everything, Shen Yuan laughs.

“So, wouldn’t you like to move to a nicer house?” he asks. Luo Chengle looks at him with an almost offended expression. “With me, of course.”

Then his sweet little boy's expression really becomes joyful.

“Yes!” he says, his smile shining. “Where Yuan-ge is, Chengle is too.”

“Fine, fine,” he pats his head. “So, what do you say we look for a nice, bigger apartment later? We can move after New Year’s, when the weather is better and there’s less snow, and I’ll feel a little better. With a bigger kitchen, a room all to yourself. And if you want to keep sleeping in my room, you can,” he says, before the boy protests, “but isn’t it better to have a place to keep all your toys and play?”

Luo Chengle thinks about it and nods. They continue eating.

At one point, Shen Jiu seems to end his phone conversation. He doesn't even look in the direction before he shoulders his jacket and leaves the apartment, slamming the door. Shen Yuan grimaces—whatever happened, it was *really* serious.

“Is Jiu-ge mad at me?” Chengle asks, his voice soft. Shen Yuan cuddles him close. “He told me he wants me to call him uncle. But I like calling him Jiu-ge. Like Yuan-ge. Because you’re brothers, and you care me so pretty.”

“He’s not mad at you, darling,” Shen Yuan hums, rubbing his back. “Jiu-ge is a very busy man with many worries. He’s more likely to be mad at me.”

“No!” Chengle protests, pouting. “Yuan-ge is the best. Jiu-ge doesn’t have to be mad at Yuan-ge or… or Chengle will bite Jiu-ge!”

Shen Yuan can't help but laugh.

Only a little while later, with a dismayed expression, Yue-ge comes out of the other room. He doesn't seem to be having a good time either, judging by the way his eyes look quite red-rimmed, as if he's holding back tears.

Shen Yuan has barely finished half of his broth, but considering the state of his stomach, he thinks it's fine. He pats Chengle on the head, wiping the sauce off his face, and approaches cautiously.

“Is everything okay?” he asks. Yue-ge isn’t someone who seems to show much emotion other than a pleasant smile, but honestly, Shen Yuan supposes that’s what makes him such a good foil for Jiu-ge: where Shen Jiu is explosive, melodramatic, and over-the-top, Yue Qi is particularly calm, thoughtful, the voice of reason. They’re sort of like a functioning yin and yang. Whatever happened must have been pretty unpleasant, if even Yue-ge looks so affected.

“Everything’s fine,” Yue-ge says, with a face that seems to say the complete opposite. “Xiao Jiu just went out to smoke.”

“Uh,” Shen Yuan tilts his head, confused. “Wasn’t he quitting?”

Yue-ge sighs deeply.

“They rejected his adoption application,” he says. Shen Yuan grimaces; well, he supposes it must be quite a blow if Shen Jiu had grown attached to that particular cat, but why would anyone reject him, anyway? It’s not like their Jiu-ge has a bad reputation or that any kind of animal shelter couldn’t benefit from the publicity of being associated with the Shen family.

“That’s unfair,” is all he manages to say. Then he sighs. “I’m sorry. This must be a very difficult time. Maybe it will work out next time? I mean, Jiu-ge just moved. They take that into account sometimes, don’t they? It will surely be better next time. With things more stable and secure.”

Yue-ge nods. He pats Shen Yuan on the back a couple of times, thanking him for his good wishes. Shen Yuan lets Yue-ge go after his brother when the man seems to be gaining some control over his own expression, and when he watches him leave, he has only the briefest feeling that there is something he is truly missing.

Not that it's his problem, anyway. He sits next to Chengle and laughs only a little when the boy snuggles closer to him on the sofa, eating with his bowl of noodles almost in his lap. Shen Yuan can't even understand how something as simple as seeing his baby healthy, happy, and eating can make him so happy.

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Jiu-ge and Yue-ge leave early in the afternoon. Shen Yuan has already written to kitchen-Ayi to explain his new diet and ask if she's qualified to do it; with her confirmation, she'll come early tomorrow to take charge of the cooking, so Shen Yuan only has something very important to discuss with Chengle.

When the Hamtaro episode ends, Shen Yuan turns off the television and takes both of Luo Chengle's little hands in his own.

“Chengle, there’s something important we need to talk about. Okay, honey?”

The boy nods. He shifts in his seat so he's sitting with his legs crossed in front of Shen Yuan, his expression so sweet it hurts Shen Yuan. He takes a deep breath.

“First,” he says, and squeezes his little hands in his, “I want you to know that I love you so much. Do you understand? And no matter what happens, I *won’t* leave your side.” And when he says that, Chengle seems to understand what they’re talking about, because his eyes widen a little, a look of terror clearly on his tender little face. “Your father is here. Not right now, but he’ll be back and—”

“*No*!” Chengle doesn’t even let him finish speaking. He throws himself at Shen Yuan, clinging to him tightly. “No, no, no. Yuan-ge, no. I don’t want to go with Father Emperor. I want Yuan-ge, please, *please*…”

“Shhh,” Shen Yuan coos, rocking them both. “It won’t get you far. I promise.”

Luo Chengle raise his head a little, his big eyes more curious than scared.

“Not far?” he asks. His face is still so sad it breaks Shen Yuan’s heart. “I don’t want to be far from Yuan-ge. I like home. And hugs. I like it when Yuan-ge hugs me tightly because it feels like love. When Mom loved me more than she loved the baby.”

Shen Yuan can do nothing but hug him with all the strength in his arms.

“I promised I would stay with you,” he says, and Luo Chengle nods. His eyes are watery, and Shen Yuan wipes his tears away with his fingers. “And I will. I can’t go to the palace with you now, but you will stay here until I get better. Then we’ll see what happens,” he says, and he coos to Chengle close. “Your father and I made an agreement. He won’t take you away from me,” and Shen Yuan sighs, resigned. “But I can’t take him away from you either.”

Luo Chengle doesn't look happy about that at all.

“Father Emperor is evil,” he stammers, hiding in Shen Yuan’s embrace. “He’s rude. And hurtful. He never plays with me and always brings new bad wives who are even ruder and meaner. He doesn’t love me. I don’t love *him*.”

Shen Yuan sighs. He brushes Chengle's hair between his fingers, gently rocking the child back and forth. Luo Chengle doesn't let go, as if he's afraid of being separated from him again.

“We'll deal with it. And everything will be okay,” Shen Yuan says. He’s not sure exactly how, but by Chengle, he’ll get there. “I promise.”

Luo Chengle doesn't let go of him for the next half hour. Shen Yuan doesn't complain either, even though his leg cramps a little; it's nothing too painful, and when Luo Chengle seems to

sigh in resignation, Shen Yuan believes he's done very well to talk to him. Now, when Luo Binghe appears again, Luo Chengle will already be prepared for it.

It only takes Shen Yuan being prepared to deal with it, and he is certain that he has never been *less* prepared to deal with a Demon Emperor, with Luo-Fucking-Binghe in his damned, disgusting, horrendous life.

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That first night after leaving the hospital, with a clearly unstable Luo Binghe in front of him, Shen Yuan only has one thing on his mind. The only concern that has kept him going, the only thing that has truly made his life have any genuine meaning.

It's not that Shen Yuan doesn't love his life or *living*, as Shen Jiu is fond of accusing him of at times. Sitting around at home doing nothing isn't depressed; depressed people *actually* have problems that make them depressed, aren't they supposed to? Shen Yuan, really, what does he have to complain about without coming across as ungrateful? He's *happy*, was happy. His family loved him, they always looked out for him, he lacked nothing by any economic standard. He had food, a roof over his head, his parents didn't pressure him to get married or get a real job. Did he have *a reason* to be depressed?

It's more like, actually, he was just… *bored*, in a way. Sad, sometimes. He couldn't even say lonely when he was out in the big wide internet, and you can never really be alone on the internet, can you? He's just. Good. Reading PIDW was the only thing he looked forward to, the only thing that made anything in his life—even complaining—make a little sense, a little color, a little brightness out of his daily boredom.

With Luo Chengle in his life, arriving like a literal bolt of lightning, Shen Yuan was able to find a genuine reason for him, a purpose other than to rot in his own bitterness and sulking for the rest of his days.

“I want Chengle to be happy,” is all Shen Yuan says. Luo Binghe has that hollow expression. Sitting there in his desk chair, his shoulders more slumped than firm, he looks more tired than intimidating. He looks as if he’s *genuinely* affected by the circumstances he’s in right now.

“Why?” he asks. His question, this time, doesn’t really sound like a threat.

Shen Yuan sighs.

“I don’t want to argue,” he warns. Luo Binghe seems very willing to, but Shen Yuan is actually *very* tired. He doesn’t think he has the energy to deal with anything but the important stuff right now. “I’ve grown attached to Chengle. He’s the smartest, most adorable, sweetest boy,” he explains. A part of him, something twisting like poison too sour to swallow, tells him that *Luo Binghe should know.* That he should know this about his son. That he should know the way when Chengle smiles, his first smile is almost surprised, and then it lights up his whole face. That he should know that his favorite animals are tigers, but that he likes Ice-Horned Wolf pups and playing with them when Mobei-bofu takes him and his siblings training in the north. That he should understand how much he loves soft pastel colors

because, even if he doesn't want to talk about it much, they remind him of his mom and their happy times together. "Why wouldn't I want him to be happy?"

Luo Binghe stares at him too intently. One of his hands rests under his chin, his elbow resting on the arm of his desk chair. With one leg draped over the other, he's almost a statue of a man, a sinister silhouette that breaks with the reality of his room.

Once, in a past that now seemed so distant, Shen Yuan had seen a fanart of Luo Binghe on a throne surrounded by the blood of his enemies in exactly that same position. His more hysterical side, that side of his mind that sought to grasp at anything before giving in to hysteria, actually considered sending an extra tip to the artist who created the fanart for the artistic accuracy.

"Is that all Shizun wants?" And when Luo Binghe speaks, there's *something* different about it. His mouth modulates the words, but it's as if they're physical. They rupture through the air thickly, coated in a poison that, like flowers of the cursed PIDW, seems sweet before it strikes. "How altruistic of Shizun. Between regaining everything he's lost, obtaining more than he could have ever wished for, what he desires from this Lord is for this Emperor to ensure the happiness of his own son?"

Luo Binghe's smile is a mask. It stretches across his mouth, wide, full lips revealing white teeth and sharp fangs. Shen Yuan takes a stifled breath.

"Not at all," he replies immediately. "You're misunderstanding, of course. No, I don't want *you* to ensure Chengle's happiness. I'm telling you that *I* will ensure Chengle's happiness. I want him to be happy, and I won't believe it unless I see it with my own eyes."

Luo Binghe narrows his eyes. Even though he's smiling, it's worse than if he were expressionless: something about his smile burns, like the expression of a predator on the verge of attacking. It's a sign of who has the power, Shen Yuan supposes; Luo Binghe is quite certain that he is more powerful, stronger.

Shen Yuan is only sure of one thing, much more powerful than Luo Binghe: the genuine love and happiness of a child is not something fickle or manipulable.

Shen Yuan doesn't have his cane to stand up. He doesn't think he can either. He hauls his feet up onto the bed, and trembling, he clutches his knees close to his chest. When he does, the slight ache in his muscles distracts him from the phantom pain above his stomach. Even if he's aware that it doesn't hurt, Luo Binghe's claws, black and shiny, are a menacing shadow that sets his nerves on edge.

"I want his happiness," Shen Yuan repeats, "and I will make sure of it. And you will allow me to make sure I do *whatever it takes* to make Chengle happy. That is all I ask. Allow me to take care of him, allow me to make him happy, and I will consider any debt you owe for harming me as settled."

It's risky, he supposes. Luo Binghe seems to examine his every word as if Shen Yuan has some sort of hidden agenda behind it. Little by little, the smile fades. It fades from his face so

slowly that Shen Yuan isn't sure when Luo Binghe's strange, plastic expression transformed into that grimace of teeth, disdain, and contempt.

He doesn't respond. For a long moment, Shen Yuan feels watched. It's as if every corner of his room has eyes, a dark, hostile feeling, something more dangerous crawling over his skin, drilling into his veins. Luo Binghe watches him, the black of his eyes an abyss yawning with no way back.

“Shizun thinks he’s very clever,” Luo Binghe says at the end. “But Shizun *won’t be able* to lure this Lord away from his son and keep him for himself, not even with such words.”

Shen Yuan exhales slowly.

“I wouldn’t think so,” he lies, with a strained smile. “Why would I want to keep Chengle away from Luo Binghe? Of course, if Luo Binghe makes Chengle happy, *why* would I want to keep him away?”

Luo Binghe's eyebrow twitches.

“If Shizun’s refusal to part with this Emperor’s son is so adamant, can this Lord assume that Shizun isn’t afraid to accompany them to the palace?” Even with the darkness in his eyes, that false smile shows when he speaks. It’s a threat, one that has never been anything other than one.

Shen Yuan should feel threatened. He should feel fear, dread, *horror.* Luo Binghe is there; who else but Shen Yuan, and probably Airplane, could know the extent of the power and threat that Luo Binghe implies? Yet Shen Yuan can find nothing but a strange, peaceful security. His walls are papered with drawings of Luo Chengle. Even the one on his desk, right next to Luo Binghe, has him and Luo Chengle surrounded by colorful clouds and stars. It is a very nice, colorful, and well-done drawing for a child Chengle's age.

There won't be another chance like that. Shen Yuan knows it.

“Of course,” he says, forcing a smile. And when Luo Binghe’s smile is triumphant, Shen Yuan simply says, “Wherever Chengle *wants* to go, I’ll go with him.”

Luo Binghe's smile freezes on his face. One side of his mouth trembles. There is no triumph in him today, and without an immediate retort, Shen Yuan needn't gloat that Luo Binghe knows that, if it's based on Chengle's decision, he will of course not for a moment choose to return to the palace by his side.

“Then,” Luo Binghe says, fierce as the silence before a catastrophe, “this Emperor will stay. A father belongs where his son is, does he not?”

Shen Yuan swallows everything he can say that would definitely screw everything up. He swallows, doesn't Emperor Binghe have more sons to take care of? Doesn't the Emperor have wives to look after? Doesn't an Emperor belong to his empire, a husband to his wives, a father to all those stray children? He swallows each biting word acidly, fakes a smile that surely looks plastic on his face, and hugs his knees tighter to his chest.

“I’m glad we reached an agreement,” he says, even though his eyelid is twitching. “Now, let me sleep. Chengle will arrive tomorrow, and before he arrives, I need to organize important things for him now that you’re here.”

Luo Binghe stands up. For a moment, Shen Yuan's pulse races. He doesn't know exactly why, and at the same time he notices every detail: the bearing of his stature, the broad shape of his body, the way he still poses a threat. Just standing there, looking at him, is enough to set his survival instincts in alarm, screaming at him to get to safety immediately.

Luo Binghe doesn't advance. He doesn't attack, he doesn't lunge. He gives a tiny, tiny bow of his head.

“If those are Shizun’s wishes,” he hums, a false joy in his voice. The smile on his face is as unreal as it is hostile. “This Lord wishes Shizun proper rest and recuperation. Shizun must count on this Emperor for whatever he requires as long as the goal is *my* son’s happiness.”

Luo Binghe leaves. Behind him, his robes sway like sinister shadows, as if the fabric they were made from were scraps of starless night, a black hole swallowing all light around it. Shen Yuan has no idea where he's going, *if he's leaving* his apartment, if he's just staying somewhere else. He stares at the lit light, has no idea where his cane is, and his entire body burns with adrenaline and exhaustion so much that he's not sure if he stands up to turn off the light, he'll make it back to bed in one piece.

Shen Yuan is still weighing the pros and cons when the light, with a resounding *click,* turns off on its own. The door, so slowly that it seems a terrifying provocation to his nerves, closes with a creak of the hinges until it slams shut, the click of the closer *locking him in* echoing in his ears.

Luo Binghe has locked him up. With a key. In his own room.

Shen Yuan watches the shadows in his room, staring unseeingly, and lets himself fall onto the bed. He ignores how each shadow seems to be staring back at him, how each silhouette, if he looks at it too closely, seems as if Luo Binghe has never left the room.

He's not going to deal with that shit now. He crawls under the covers, presses one of Chengle's stuffed animals to his face—almost sobbing when he notices it still smells a little like his baby—and forces himself to relax and sleep.

He'll go crazy when he has the time and health to do so.

Chapter End Notes

SY, looking at Bingge: Well, I guess we have shared custody for now

SY, the oblivious jerk that he is: Sorry, I hope you can adopt another cat without any problems soon :(

I DEBATED A LOT about whether to continue directly with the ending scene at the beginning or not. I mean, it would have been the most linear, but I actually felt it might be a good way to close the chapter :B but yes, the ending scene is the scene directly following the ending scene of the previous chapter. Sorry if it didn't make sense, my creative ideas tend to be weird sometimes (?)
F in the chat for Jiu-ge and his non-adoption. I mean, he has money, a good reputation, but I don't think the damn Chinese government will let it go that Jiu-ge is legally "single" and has been living with his male "roommate" for years. Sorry, dear, maybe you can keep trying with the cats, and I hope you don't resent your Yuan-di for having your sweet new nephew when you've been wanting for god knows how long a child, and he gets one in a snap of his fingers by accident. Ahem :P

And speaking of Jiu-ge, see you next week, dear. Maybe you'll find an unwelcome guest in your newly released-from-the-hospital brother's apartment :B

A little of Chengle here!!! But it's necessary to keep him away from the main drama; he's a baby, he needs to be protected. I missed him again too, sweet baby, but there'll be more Chengle!! It was just necessary to establish Binghe a little first and *glare at Bingge* warn the baby before a nasty nightmare befalls him. Bingge came to stay (unfortunately!!!!!), but under Shen Yuan's rules and regulations to ensure Chengle's happiness :3 HEHEHEHEH

ANYWAY, YOU KNOW!!!! THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING. I'M HAVING SO MUCH FUN WITH THIS. Thank you so much for your concern, too. I know updating daily is a bit difficult, but at this point in my mental health (?) it sustains me more than anything. So I wholeheartedly thank you for joining me in all of this :'D
I HOPE YOU ENJOYED THE CHAPTER!!! You know you know, kudo-interaction-comment, I'm here, laughing out loud with all of you!!! I love you so much, you're absolutely amazing. I AM FASCINATED that you're all theorizing with ways to end this positively for everyone, and I can only confirm that there will be no SY in the harem nor will he find a happy ending in the palace :B We're here to shatter Bingge's world as he knows it, which clearly involves completely tearing him out of his comfort zone :P
THANK YOU AGAIN!!!! SEE YOU SOON :3

Chapter 11: Second and third day of recovery out

Chapter Notes

> Remember that song from The Witcher 2, "Burn Butcher Burn"? Well, now my sister has read this fic and she's all "BUUURN, BURN, BINGGE, BUUURN" every time I tell her some new nonsense about the plot I'm planning for that big moron. I love her Btw I've already decided who I'm going to send SY to therapy with. I mean, it's probably slightly unexpected by most standards, but YOU'RE going to enjoy it so much because I'm already enjoying it :B HEHEHEHEHE 😈😈😈
>
> Chapter warnings: mentions of previous childhood neglect, clear meds withdrawal symptoms, denial of meds dependency issues
>
> Enjoy the chapter!!! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan forgets that Luo Binghe is a constant, active threat for the next day. There is no sign of him that afternoon, and at night, Shen Yuan hugs Luo Chengle in bed beside him and watches him sleep peacefully until his eyes burn. In the morning, Shen Yuan nearly burns some toast making breakfast for Chengle. Shen Yuan remains on his liquid diet, takes his medication exactly as Shen Jiu has ordered, and doesn't complain or think anything of it.

The kitchen-Ayi arrives. She gives Chengle her usual homemade candies, shares her good wishes with Shen Yuan, and locks herself away to cook. She stays a little longer than usual, and Shen Yuan feels *almost* normal. It's impossible for him not to notice that strange, lingering sensation, like an icy chill on his skin.

Luo Chengle notices this too. Whenever Shen Yuan starts to notice him, Chengle immediately seems to demand that they go somewhere else: if he notices it in the living room, he says to go to the bedroom because he wants to lie down and read. If he senses it in the bedroom, he suddenly gets the urge to draw at the table. Shen Yuan supposes that Luo Chengle perceives this not so much as a threat that makes his hair stand on end, but as something he has grown accustomed to instinctively avoiding.

It's a little sad to think about.

Kitchen-Ayi finally leaves. Shen Yuan heats up some of Yue-ge's last food, texts him again for his concern, and they eat. Shen Yuan hasn't even finished eating—rambling a little over his half-full bowl—when they can both feel the vile, crushing sensation of Xin Mo slicing through the air.

Luo Chengle reacts first. He jumps out of his chair urgently, pulling Shen Yuan's arm so hard his shoulder *burns*. He almost drags him out of the chair, wanting to escape.

“Chengle,” Shen Yuan tugs at him, and the boy looks at him with desperate eyes. “You don’t have to be afraid. I won’t let him take you away.”

Luo Chengle just sticks to his side, holding his hand so firmly that his fingers hurt.

The portal opens in the living room, the same place where Luo Binghe had left the day before. The portal is a black thing, a sinister crevice. Shen Yuan sighs, standing up. He grips his cane tightly, and with Luo Chengle glued to his side, reluctant to move forward, Shen Yuan crosses the short path from the dining room to the living room.

Luo Binghe emerges from the portal. There are new robes on his body, but rather than having tidied up and changed, he only seems to have shed a few imposing outer layers. As the portal closes behind him, he turns around, and Shen Yuan tries to stand his ground.

Luo Binghe has sunken eyes and an even more tired expression than the day before.

“*Shizun*” is the first thing he says, like an exhalation. Shen Yuan grimaces.

“Who are you calling Shizun” he complains. It’s almost a habit at this point. Chengle’s hand tightens on his, and if the boy could, Shen Yuan is absolutely sure he’d be hiding in his pockets.

Finally, Luo Binghe lowers his gaze. Shen Yuan feels alert, his pulse trembling on the cane. He slides his gaze to Luo Chengle who, holding Shen Yuan's hand and hiding behind his leg, meets his father's gaze with a fierce determination.

Shen Yuan can only be proud of him and his tender bravery.

“Chengle,” Luo Binghe says. When he says his name, Shen Yuan can’t help but sulk. It sounds like a word, not a name. He doesn’t say it with affectionate warmth, nor with the gentleness with which his sweet child’s name should be said. “Come closer.”

Chengle's lower lip trembles. Shen Yuan is very hesitant to let him go. It's almost physical to let go of his hand as the boy steps out from behind his leg. Slowly, with a stealth Shen Yuan has only seen from him once before, Luo Chengle takes one, two steps. Then, structured and tense, he bows.

“Father Emperor,” he says, and Shen Yuan’s stomach turns.

Luo Binghe continues to examine him with that unfathomable gaze. Shen Yuan is on the verge of throwing his cane at him as a distraction, picking up Chengle and running. He has a passport for Chengle, so if they take a plane far enough away, maybe they can escape…?

He's not *that* stupid. While the idea of sneaking off to some secluded spot where Luo Binghe can't find them is certainly tempting, he's certain his weak, pathetic body would perish at the first airport, not to mention the fact that he doesn't even know what dosage of medication he's taking now, let alone what their names are.

Shen Yuan sighs. He really, *really* doesn't want to deal with this.

Luo Binghe takes a step toward Luo Chengle. The boy is braver than Shen Yuan, because Shen Yuan would have already run away; Luo Chengle straightens his back, raising his chin. Even if Shen Yuan can't see his expression, he is proud of him with every fiber of his being.

“Chengle is taller,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan can feel bile in his throat, which shouldn’t even be healthy given his recent hospitalization. “He’s lost muscle.”

“In this world, Chengle isn’t forced to train,” Luo Chengle says firmly in his small voice. “Yuan-ge is my protector. There are no wars or demons or monsters under the bed. No one harms me. Here, they just fight for fun.”

Something seems to tug at Luo Binghe's face. His eyebrows twitch, his expressionlessness shattered. Shen Yuan steps forward and pulls Chengle's hand before Luo Binghe's expression *truly* twists into disgust.

“Your lunch is getting cold, baby,” he says almost impulsively. Luo Chengle doesn’t even hesitate once before looking away from Luo Binghe, staring at Shen Yuan with shining eyes. “Come on, come on. You don’t want the meatballs your Uncle Yue made for you to get cold, do you?”

Luo Chengle runs to his side, hugging him tightly, and then runs at full speed to the dining room. His sweet boy doesn't look back even once.

Shen Yuan exhales, relieved. Then, he turns around. Luo Binghe is right behind him.

Even better.

“Shiz–…”

Shen Yuan is pretty sure he'll lose his hand for that, but what the hell. It stings, but it probably stings Luo Binghe's pride more as he slams his palm against his cheek with all the strength he can muster.

“*Dare* to look at my son with disappointment again, and I’ll make you *swallow* my cane,” he hisses softly. Luo Binghe’s face is still turned to the side, his gaze unfocused, as if he’s not registering exactly what’s happening. “You have no *right* here. In your fucking shitty universe, you’ll be an Emperor. Here, you’re *nothing* more than a father whose son can’t even stand to see you. We agreed on *his* happiness. Either you make him happy, *or you leave.*
”

Luo Binghe blinks. His blinks are slow, measured. Once, twice. Then he turns to face Shen Yuan, his gaze so hateful and intense that Shen Yuan feels his breath hitch.

“*You dare* to hit this Lord, you-…”

“We’ve reached an *agreement*,” Shen Yuan says firmly. “Does Emperor Luo Binghe break his word? Is this what I’m hearing?”

Luo Binghe doesn't advance. He doesn't strike back. There's only a gaze charged with so many contradictory, furious, fleeting emotions that Shen Yuan feels overwhelmed. His knees

tremble, but honestly, he's been standing too long. His knees are always trembling.

Luo Binghe seems to have made a decision. He takes a step back and, without saying anything, takes a paper envelope from his sleeve. It is neatly folded parchment paper, sealed with wax, and hands it to Shen Yuan.

“My Second Wife and Third Wife are sending this to the *caretaker* of this Lord’s son,” Luo Binghe says firmly. “As Shizun can see, this Lord has been *respectful* and has not opened it, as was the direct instruction of this Emperor’s Third Wife.”

Shen Yuan holds the letter. *It's* certainly heavy. It seems to contain quite a bit of paper inside, and Shen Yuan isn't entirely sure he has any idea what's inside. He nods and turns, heading back into the kitchen.

Then, with a nod, he points to Luo Binghe the sofa and the coffee table.

“Did you eat?” he asks. Luo Binghe doesn’t respond verbally, so Shen Yuan can only guess. “I’ll heat up some food for you. You *can’t* eat with Chengle until he *asks* for it. You’ll eat at the coffee table in the living room away.”

A hateful part of his head wants to tell him '*and with no TV,'* like he's scolding a child, but he bites his tongue. Luo Binghe doesn't refuse the food, so Shen Yuan heads off to the kitchen and rummages around. There's only one serving of Yue-ge's noodles with meatballs and sauce left, but he doesn't think it'll be good any longer in the fridge and hates throwing food away, so he carries a plate out and microwaves it. He looks over Chengle's various fruit waters, deciding that Luo Binghe hasn't earned the right to processed sugars yet, so he carries some plain mineral water for him.

“Luo Binghe,” he calls as soon as he places the dish on a tray. The damn Heavenly Demon is literally on his back a moment later. It’s *chilling,* but Shen Yuan supposes he’ll just have to *get used to it.* “This food is for you.”

Luo Binghe looks at the tray with a strange expression on his face. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

“Yes, I know, what a pathetic meal for an Emperor,” he clicks his tongue, waving his free hand in the air. “Oh, this Venerable Emperor *would never* put anything other than delicacies worthy of his position and power in his mouth. How could Shizun possibly *dare* feed this Venerable Emperor reheated meals?” Luo Binghe’s expression grows more furious as Shen Yuan follows his imitation. He pauses for the sake of his throat or his hand, whichever Luo Binghe seems most eager to reap. “Everything eaten in this house is reheated food. But it is good food. Enjoy your meal.”

He doesn't stay to see if Luo Binghe clears his tray as he retrieves the envelope from Mingyan and heads toward the dining room. He slumps into his chair, nearly panting with heavy breaths. Cold sweat runs down his back, and as soon as he sits down, he can feel the constant tingling creep up his legs.

Luo Chengle has a tiny frown, his mouth is tight, and he is killing his noodles with his chopsticks.

“Baby,” Shen Yuan reaches out to brush a curl away from his forehead. “Aren’t you hungry anymore?”

Luo Chengle looks at him with big sad eyes.

“Are you going to marry Father Emperor?”

The laugh that escapes Shen Yuan is so ridiculously loud that he has to cover his mouth with his hand.

“*Chengle*!” he says, but he’s still laughing through his hand. He clears his throat, shakes his head, taking deep breaths to recover. “Of course *not*. Why do you think that?”

Luo Chengle pouts. He keeps killing the noodles in his bowl, sauce splashing all over the edges.

“You hit him,” he complains, sulking. “And you give him food.”

Shen Yuan sighs, shaking his head. Truly, this child…

“Well, maybe among demons that means something, but I’m *very* human, and to me it just means that your father is a real pain in the ass who we’ll unfortunately never be able to get rid of,” he explains. Luo Chengle chuckles when Shen Yuan calls him ‘a real pain in the ass’, and Shen Yuan pats his little head, happy to see his mischievous little smile. “So, even though your father is a very drama queen right now, he’s here because he wants to right all his *many* wrongs.”

Luo Chengle doesn't seem too happy about that either. He keeps stabbing at his plate with his chopsticks, making more of a mess than eating, and Shen Yuan takes the chopsticks out of his hand and pushes the plate away, taking his sauce-splattered little hands in his own.

“Chengle, honey,” he murmurs. “I know your father hasn’t been a good father to you, or to your siblings. And I know you’re not happy with him here,” he says, putting the boy’s emotions on the table. It’s better if both of them know, and, above all, if Chengle has a safe space where he can acknowledge and accept what he’s feeling. “Am I right?”

Luo Chengle nods. His pout trembles.

“I don’t want to go with him,” he whispers. “I want to be with Yuan-ge. I don’t want to go back to the palace. I don’t want to train with siblings ever again, or be hit or bullied. It hurts so much. Here,” he puts his little hand on his chest. “I don’t like it. They’re *mean*, but I’ve never been mean. It’s not fair.”

Shen Yuan drags his chair closer, pulling Chengle into a hug. The boy collapses in his arms, trembling, but he doesn't cry. He just accepts the hug and hugs Shen Yuan very, very tightly.

“He won’t take you there if you don’t want to go,” Shen Yuan promises. “You’ll only be where you’re happy. And I know you’re very happy here right now,” and Luo Chengle nods, his eyes growing more watery with each passing moment. “But I know you were once happy

in the palace, even if it was just a little bit. Don’t you want to go back, say hello to your siblings who aren’t rude to you, and spend some time with your mom?”

Luo Chengle shakes his head. His cheeks glow red.

“Mom has the baby,” he complains. He pouts. “She replaced me. I don’t want her anymore.”

Shen Yuan sighs. Well, he can't fix everything in such a short time. He kisses Chengle's forehead and rubs his back in small, soothing circles.

“The important thing here,” he whispers, “is that wherever you're happy, you can stay. Wherever you go, I'll go. And if you ever want to return to the palace, even for a visit, I'll go with you. My sweet baby has nothing to worry about. Your rude father won't take you away by force if you don't want to.”

Luo Chengle nods. He snuggles a little deeper into his embrace, and Shen Yuan rocks him, letting the boy curl up with his ear to his chest. He's sure he read somewhere that children find it relaxing to lie down and listen to their mother's heartbeat, but he's certainly not Chengle's mother, and Chengle is still too old for that to work for him, he thinks. Still, Luo Chengle seems to quite enjoy snuggling there until he calms down, then pulls away just a little.

“I like Yue-ge’s meatballs,” he whispers, looking down at his plate. Shen Yuan notices that although Luo Chengle has taken his anger out on the noodles, the meatballs are still intact, perfect for eating in one bite, and he can’t help but laugh. “They’re even tastier than Ayi’s.”

Shen Yuan kisses his forehead.

“Eat your meatballs, baby,” he hums, and Chengle nods. “Then I’ll ask your Uncle Yue if he can send us some more. Would you like some sweet pudding for dessert afterward? I’m sure your Uncle Airplane bought some he didn’t eat when he ordered sweets from the supermarket last time.”

He figures that since they're packaged, there shouldn't be any problems as long as they're not past the expiration date. Still, he'll check it carefully before offering him any. Luo Chengle nods, his face regaining some cheerfulness, and continues eating. Shen Yuan takes a couple of sips of what's left of his soup, resigned. The flavor is still downright flat, but it's not like he expected anything from such bland white broth. Yue-ge probably did his best, but doing his best didn't always mean it would work.

Shen Yuan stays by Luo Chengle's side until he's finished eating, keeping him company throughout the meal. Although he leaves a few mangled noodles, he's practically eaten his entire plate, so Shen Yuan has no problem rummaging through the refrigerator for some sugar for his child. Sure enough, he takes out the vanilla pudding, whose expiration date is a year away, and brings it to Chengle. He continues to stay by Luo Chengle's side while he eats and regains some of his good humor, asking if they can watch a movie or watch more Hamtaro. He also starts talking about how he wants to make snowmen with Yanshi, how they haven't played together in a long, long time, and how he's never made one before and would really

like to, so Shen Yuan promises that he'll talk to Uncle Airplane about taking him to the park to make snowmen.

Shen Yuan almost forgets Luo Binghe is in the apartment until it's time to use the sofa and put on the movie. Luo Chengle is tense again, but Shen Yuan does his best by pretending that the Luo Binghe sitting on the other end of the sofa is a giant Demon Emperor ringdoll, puts on Lilo & Stitch again – they've seen it at least four times at this point, and honestly, Shen Yuan doesn't care given how much Chengle seems to love it – and curls up in a comfy position with his baby wrapped in a hug as the movie starts.

If it weren't for the Demon Emperor at the end of the sofa, just a foot away, it would be *almost* normal. But he still has Chengle in his arms, so Shen Yuan isn't going to complain too much about it.

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It's only when Chengle is taking an afternoon nap after Shen Yuan introduced him to Just Dance to calm his restless little legs and burn off the sugar in his body that Shen Yuan settles into his comfortable, ergonomic desk chair – really, *everyone* has been using his own chair except him lately – and opens the envelope Liu Mingyan has sent to him.

The first thing Shen Yuan gets is a small piece of cut paper. It's a carefully kept scroll, and Shen Yuan nearly gasps, his heart in his mouth and his hands shaking, when he sees Luo Chengle's tiny, tiny hand in ink there. Right below it, written in neat calligraphy, are the characters for his name.

This was from the Hundred Days of Chengle. Shen Yuan holds it with great care, setting it aside before ruining it with his tears. He presses his hands against his eyes until they hurt and there's a minimal risk of crying when he removes them, and continues to open the interior.

What follows is a perfectly normal letter, except that the handwriting is rubbish and it's clearly Sha Hualing's own handwriting. It takes Shen Yuan more than a second to understand it—apparently, thanks to the photographs, this was the first time Liu Mingyan had gotten out of bed in *two* months, if only to rummage through his trunks for things from when Luo Chengle was a baby and cry some more over them. Shen Yuan pinches the bridge of his nose, rubs the aching headache on his forehead, and curses the fact that he doesn't have access to any painkillers. Sha Hualing *demands* that he send more photographs, and that if he values his fragile human life, he should do it *soon*.

She thanks him.

The following letter is from Liu Mingyan. It is much shorter, with shaky strokes that seem a far cry from the elegant calligraphy that decorated that small piece of scroll. Liu Mingyan, her hand trembling, thanks him for caring so well for her son. She apologizes, her words sounding deeply sincere and painfully raw; she fears that her heart demons will take her, because even the most skilled healers believe that the heart demons that dwell in women's hearts are more powerful, and far more violent, than in men's. She does not wish to leave her beloved son or daughter orphaned; but her fear, and her pain, have been so great that she has not realized how much she had abandoned her little boy until it was too late.

She thanks him too. Her words are shaky, but by the end of the letter they seem to regain some strength. She'll understand if Chengle is upset, she'll understand if he hates her for having cast aside her heart when he needed her most. But please tell him how much his mother loves him and that she'll wait for him when his young heart is ready to forgive her.

Well, no one can blame Shen Yuan for crying a little. He carefully puts the letters away, pondering when he can share this with Chengle, even more carefully the tiny handprint of Luo Chengle's little hand. Just looking at it makes his chest clench and burn. Ah, how could he have been such a tiny baby?

Shen Yuan curls up next to Chengle, holding him close. The boy doesn't wake up, snuggling closer to Shen Yuan, seeking hugs even in his sleep, and Shen Yuan can do nothing but do so. He's too weak, and he loves his sweet boy too much, not to want to hold him in his arms every hour of every day of their lives.

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Airplane takes Chengle out to play the next day. It's a Saturday at the park, and while Shen Yuan isn't exactly sure Yanshi is there, it's always a good idea to try. Luo Binghe seems reluctant to let anyone remove Luo Chengle from his sight—the damn hypocritical bastard—but when Airplane squeaks like a damn hamster, bows low, babbles a few pathetic things, and apparently looks terrified yet respectful enough, Luo Binghe seems to simply accept that he's so pathetic that he wouldn't try to steal his son.

“Send me pics,” Shen Yuan threatens. “All the pics. Without fail. If I receive at least fifty, I’ll *consider* ordering you a hot chocolate when you’re back.”

“Bless you, Cucumber-bro,” and Airplane waves goodbye with his ridiculous shiny blue gloves, pulling Luo Chengle along and literally carrying him on his hip as the boy waves to Shen Yuan with both hands. Even reluctant to leave his side, playing in the snow had won out—especially considering that even in his most healthy state that was something Shen Yuan wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to do.

Shen Yuan sighs. He slumps back against the sofa, staring at the lights until he can see red, pink, and black rims at the edges, his eyes burning so bad he literally can't focus afterward.

After he has digested enough of his existential angst, he turns to the damned Luo Binghe who seems to have taken over the damned sofa as if he were afraid of being displaced from it if he stay away from it for a moment.

“Fine,” he says, determined. “Let’s go buy you some clothes. I’m not going to have you in the house in those robes anymore. I’m sure *that* robe moves on its own even when you’re still, and if I find out that belt is made of the skin of some humanoid demon, I’ll scream.”

Finding modern clothes that Luo Binghe likes *is* difficult. He doesn't like anything, which is to be expected, and the things he likes, or at least doesn't dislike that much, don't seem to come in his tall-XL size. Shen Yuan browses through many options. He sticks to winter clothes, and when Luo Binghe is a complete mess demanding high-quality fabrics, Shen

Yuan starts throwing several of the ugliest sweaters he can think of into the shopping cart every time Luo Binghe makes a demand for something.

Even if he hasn't said it out loud, Luo Binghe seems to understand exactly what he's doing, because he eventually tightens his mouth and simply points to which of the two options Shen Yuan shows him seems better.

The expense is considerable. Shen Yuan adds a few new jackets and sweaters for himself, as well as a new pair of formal pants and a knitted sweater. He's sure he won't be able to skip Christmas this time, and honestly, even if he doesn't fully enjoy any kind of festivities and family gatherings, he believes Chengle deserves a nice Christmas. What child doesn't, after all?

…even with all the explanations that go into explaining *what* Christmas is supposed to be. Damn it.

“Your clothes will arrive tomorrow,” Shen Yuan says when he finally pays and receives the purchase confirmation email. Then, with only a hint of resignation, he opens another cart and adds shampoo and hair cream for curly adult hair. “I’ll get you something specifically for your hair, too.”

Just saying that makes Luo Binghe's face turns almost sinister.

“There’s *nothing wrong* with this Lord’s hair,” he hisses. His mouth curls, even the gums of his teeth visible, a sneer so full of contempt that Shen Yuan pinches his leg to keep from rolling his eyes. “Whatever Shizun’s implying is-…”

“Shut up,” Shen Yuan complains, sighing. “I never said anything was *wrong* with your hair, Luo Binghe. I said I’d buy you something *specifically* for it. Your hair and Chengle’s have a different texture than mine. We can’t use the same products.”

Luo Binghe narrows his eyes.

“Of course,” he says, his words trailing off acidly. “Shizun would find a way to see less of this Lord, to make a difference, to…”

Shen Yuan doesn't listen to a single thing he's saying. He pulls one of the pillows off the sofa, places it over his face, and screams. When he stops screaming into the pillow, he moves it away, and Luo Binghe looks at him with such a surprised expression it's *almost* funny.

“You’re really getting on my nerves,” he hisses, his throat raw and his voice hoarse. “I’m not seeing you less. Different doesn’t mean *wrong*, you dumbass. I’ve been taking care of Chengle’s hair this *whole* time. When he first arrived, it was an impossible thing to comb, but it’s starting to take shape. Don’t you like those pretty curls of his, you huge moron? You could have some like that if you’d stop treating it like everyone else’s damn hair. It’s obvious you’re not like everyone else’s, and you obviously *know* it. It’s visible to the naked eye and obvious. Treating you the same as everyone else *won’t* help because you needs something different and-…”

Shen Yuan breaks off. He thinks it's real, and finally, he's lost his voice from overexerting himself with his already sore and irritated throat. Then, when the blurring in his eyes becomes too much and he has to blink a couple of times, he realizes there are tears running down his face.

And *why the hell* is he crying now?

He rubs his hand against his face, snorting. He adds more adult curly-haired nonsense, scrunchies, specific brushes, and another diffuser, and buys the cart without another word.

Luo Binghe also doesn't speak for a long time. Shen Yuan stares at his screen blankly, observing as if he were still shopping. When Luo Binghe speaks, his voice is only slightly lower, somewhat strained around the edges as he asks: "If Shizun's hair is *different*, how did he learn to take care of Chengle's hair?"

“I did some research,” he answers tersely. He swallows, taking a breath. He still feels as if his voice might crack at any stupid thing. “There are many products and ways to care for the hair like Chengle’s in this world that don’t involve heat-straightening it or forcing it to look straight.”

Luo Binghe doesn't ask another question. Shen Yuan doesn't say anything else. At some point, he just puts on the TV a stupid-white Hallmark movie filling the silence in the background. He's not sure Luo Binghe can understand half of it—the subtitles are too fast, and he's not sure anyone in the xianxia world would catch half of the cultural subtexts about white people and their customs or ridiculous movies—but he just leaves it on while he checks his phone, deciding that while he's at it, he'll do some Christmas shopping early.

Luo Binghe gets up and goes to the bedroom at some point. Shen Yuan has no idea what he's going to do, but as long as he doesn't hear anything breaking, he assumes it's fine. He just stays there, and is only pleased when photos of Chengle playing in the snow start arriving one after another.

Airplane sends him exactly 51 photos and at least 10 messages saying he's waiting for his hot chocolate. Shen Yuan orders two hot chocolates—one for Airplane and one for Chengle—and, just as he's about to pay, he sighs.

“Luo Binghe,” he calls. A second later, Luo Binghe appears, a strange expression on his face staring directly at him. “Do you want to try some hot chocolate?”

Luo Binghe doesn't say yes or no. Shen Yuan relies only on the curiosity in his eyes to add another to the order. He sighs, looking at the huge list of coffees, matchas, bobba tea, and things he can't even eat right now. He resigns himself to the order.

Luo Binghe disappears back into the bedroom. Shen Yuan wraps himself in the blanket, switches the stupid movie to another stupid movie, and just lets it be.

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“I’m going to move,” Shen Yuan tells Airplane later, after Airplane has already peeled off his slush-soaked clothes. Luo Chengle has gotten into the warm, bubbly bathtub with a bunch of colorful rubber duckies, and Airplane wraps his hands around the disposable cup of hot chocolate, trying to regain the feeling in his fingers. “I don’t know where yet. After Christmas, I’ll look at some apartments with two or three bedrooms.”

He wasn't sure what to look for, honestly. A house, a flat, an apartment? He had to have a room for Chengle, of course. Maybe a library? He'd always liked the idea of a full room for a library, and the only thing that stopped him was the amount of dust the books collected, even with all the hard work. Obviously, he'd need a damn guest room—of course, Luo Binghe wasn't going anywhere anytime soon—so, three bedrooms, a study, a kitchen, a dining room, a living room? Would he find that in an apartment? Would he have to look for a house? No fucking way, he wasn't looking in anything with stairs. Although maybe if they had a house, they could have a garden for Chengle to play in? …Although it might be a hassle, having to take care of the garden for him, *too*.

Oh, and the bigger he was, the harder it was going to be for his muscles to get from one place to another on bad days…

“Wow,” Airplane nods. He looks half amazed and half as if he’d been waiting for it, only not so early. “Well, good decision. Congratulations, Cucumber-bro?”

“Move here when I move out,” Shen Yuan says, so spontaneously that even he’s surprised by his own words. He’d been thinking about how to ask him, the right way to tell him, the *perfect* way so Airplane simply wouldn’t be able to refuse.

Airplane chokes on the hot chocolate. Shen Yuan isn't sure he wants to see if it really came out of his nose.

“Bro,” he grumbles, putting down his hot chocolate and coughing. He spreads his arms, gesturing at the spacious space. “Are you kidding? I can’t even dream of paying this rent.”

“That’s fine,” Shen Yuan says, and Airplane’s look is almost insulted until Shen Yuan continues, “I don’t pay rent. This apartment is mine.”

Airplane's jaw drops. He looks around, his face twisting into a mixture of shock and horror. Then he looks back at Shen Yuan, his face looking too strange.

“Bro,” he complains again. “*How rich* is your family?”

“Xiao-Shen Industries,” Shen Yuan says, and now Airplane looks even more horrified. “Multinational. Investors and shareholder management, mostly, but they work in various fields. For example, Jiu-ge is a lawyer, and he works in the legal field, but he also handles dealing with foreign clients.”

Airplane stares at him with a strange expression that oscillates between dread and horror. Then he lets out a ferocious laugh.

“I hate you,” he says, though the way he’s laughing doesn’t seem to mean it. “Cucumber-bro, what the fuck.”

“If you don't move here, I'll have to go through the whole real estate mess of finding a lease. Then, I'll have to make sure the apartment is in good condition at all times and respond to calls whenever they need repairs or maintenance. Do you really think I want annoying tenants?” he complains, huffing. “It's a nice neighborhood. You won't have to pay rent, and you'll be able to write better, for sake of God. Everything you earn will go toward your expenses, not your survival.”

Airplane looks at him as if he's about to cry. Shen Yuan shrugs, pretending to find something on television extremely interesting, while Airplane rubs his face with his hands, his mouth curling silly and trembling.

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Shen Yuan wakes up sometime in the middle of the night in so much pain that he instinctively reaches for his painkillers. He freezes, his hand on the nightstand, finding he has no painkillers, only the exact medications for each day listed in his pillbox. His pulse trembles, a feeling of nausea creeping in. *He needs* something to dull the pain. It *burns*.

It hurts much more not to have relief than to know that you will have to feel the pain for free.

He searches through the nightstand drawer, but can't find anything behind the false bottom. His hands are almost shaking.

He forces himself out of bed. Maybe there's some medicine in his first-aid kit? Shen Jiu can't have emptied the *entire* house, right? He practically crawls to the first-aid kit in his bathroom, and when he opens it, he bursts out laughing, tears streaming down his face.

There's a stupid note from Shen Jiu. A ridiculously drawn angry face and a "Keep trying."

“Fuck you,” he snarls, crumpling the paper into a fist. Except for gauze, cotton, ear medicine, ethyl alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, and bandages, there’s no painkiller of any kind. He stumbles over his cane, heading for the kitchen, desperately searching through the cabinets and drawers. Nothing? Not one fucking Advil? Not one fucking Tylenol? Not even that fucking Chengle fever syrup! What the fuck, Jiu-ge?

He ends up on his knees, trembling, clutching his burning legs. It burns even to breathe.

“Shizun.”

The motherfucker.

'I can't handle you now,' he instinctively signs in the air. Even in the darkness, he can see Luo Binghe's eyes narrowing. There's no malice, for once. Only genuine curiosity. And Shen Yuan understands, ridiculously, that he doesn't understand what he's just said. “Hurts,” he mumbles. The word comes out ridiculously wrong. His throat feels swollen.

Luo Binghe's face contorts.

“Is Shizun going to the hospital again?” he asks. Shen Yuan shakes his head. He staggers, clutching his cane and the kitchen counter to drag himself upstairs.

“Bed,” he mumbles. There’s nothing he can do. He’ll get to the damn hospital, be looked down on, and sent to his house. Plus, they’ll probably send his brother a warning, and Shen Jiu will move in, scolding him. This isn’t the first time Shen Jiu has taken away his painkillers. It’s not the first time his parents have done it, either. It was *even worse* when he was a teenager. “I’m fine. It just hurts.”

Luo Binghe approaches. Shen Yuan shrinks back, waiting for a blow—he has no idea *why*, but he expects the pain. He expects the pain to increase, he expects Luo Binghe to finally take advantage of his weakness and finish him off.

It doesn't happen. Shen Yuan feels everything moving, and a moment later, he notices Luo Binghe carrying him in his arms.

“Put me down,” he hisses, so fast it hurts his throat. His face feels hot with humiliation, his eyes burning hotter than ever. What the *fuck*. “What the hell is wrong with you. Put me down. I don’t need yo-…”

Luo Binghe lowers him onto the sofa. Shen Yuan nearly howls as landing on the sofa pulls one of his leg muscles particularly hard, causing him to curl up, gasping for air. It hurts. It hurts so much he struggles to breathe and feels—

Warm.

The warmth is recognizable, but different. It spreads through him painlessly, a fire that courses through him and runs straight to his most aching spots. Shen Yuan lets his head bob in the warm water, dizzy, nauseous, as the heat attacks every aching spot. He can feel the tendons in his legs unwind, the way his muscles loosen, the way he nearly melts against the couch, sobbing in relief as his breaths come in short gasps.

“In Shizun’s dreams, this Lord saw Shizun use the qi of this Lord’s son to ease his pain,” Luo Binghe says, his voice only making the experience more unreal. Shen Yuan could be delirious, and it would literally be the same. “Chengle’s qi is childish, erratic. Even if his intentions were good, it’s too much for an inexperienced child.”

The warmth fades little by little. Shen Yuan stares into the shadows; his head spins, and he feels as if literally everything around him is moving. The dizziness is disturbing.

“Chengle’s talent isn’t exceptional in cultivation,” Luo Binghe continues. “He’s exceptional in martial arts and possesses the strength of a demon. He can defeat demons twice his size. Mobei Jun placed him with his brothers twice his age for this reason. Mobei Jun, however, lacks human customs. To him, any dealings with Chengle, as long as they weren’t a direct attempt on his life, were normal behavior between children. Even mild.”

Shen Yuan doesn't even realize he's laughing until it rises above the roar of his brain. He feels almost drunk.

“Are you making the excuse that you didn’t realize your older children were mistreating my baby because Mobei Jun thought it was *normal* because he’s a demon and they see violence *as normal*?” he complains. Luo Binghe doesn’t respond, but Shen Yuan doesn’t know if it’s because he doesn’t know how to respond, or because he has nothing positive to say about himself in his own defense. “You, Luo Binghe, are *their father*. They were *your* responsibility. You should have been responsible for them, to be there, to see that they *didn’t hurt* him.”

He probably should be more grateful, he thinks. His despair has lessened with the pain. Even if his head feels light, distant—just burning in a curious corner of, damn, well-applied qi had an almost anesthetic effect, so would that have any short-term impact on his body? Would it affect him physically? Would his body resent it?—he supposes he should say thanks. He should say thanks.

He can only say: “It was *you* who should have been there.”

And Luo Binghe, in the midst of darkness, answers a simple: “I know.”

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Shen Yuan opens his eyes when it's already morning. He has no idea what the hell he just dreamed, and when he gets out of bed, very careful not to wake Chengle to go to the bathroom, he doesn't find his cane anywhere nearby, nor is it lying next to the bed. Although, when he stands up, he realizes he doesn't need it either. He moves quite flexibly, without any numbness or tingling.

There's no pain in his legs, his stomach, or his entire body. His throat doesn't burn when he swallows, his lungs don't sting when he breathes.

Shen Yuan isn't too sure that was a dream.

Chapter End Notes

SY: You're obviously different and need different things that work for you, not for others
SY: Yes, we're still talking about your hair. I'm not crying about anything personal

SY: I don't understand the accusations against me; I'm not dependent on painkillers
SY, even looking for Chengle's fever syrup: ...I'm in pain, it's completely normal

CHENGLE-BINGGE REUNION!!!! Nothing went right and everything went right at the same time. Something like that
That's two hits now. Who's keeping count? Someone asked for at least ten before a Bingge redemption, so don't worry. Between physical hits and hits to the ego, I promise someone will walk away with their pride crushed, and it won't be Shen Yuan :B, a big momma bear defending his baby from everyone, even his progenitor. Bingge better try harder or he'll even lose his visitation permits

Sha Hualing is like: thanks for taking care of my wife's baby, now give me more of these magic paints to keep her happy or else
I want to give gold stars and lots of hearts to everyone who guessed where I'm taking Jiu-ge and his coughcoughbabytheftcoughcough typical Shen family adoption decisions :B poor Yue-ge, he won't know what hit him when he finds an infant in his house and his husband just says: ah, yes, is our child now

Guys, writing Bingge is HARD. I'M 101% DOING MY MIND SETS WITH EVERYTHING HE'S MISINTERPRETTING, THINKING, AND ASSUMMING WITH EVERY CONVERSATION, AND IT'S NOT EVEN HIS POV. FOR THE LOVE OF GOD. SOMEONE GIVE THIS MAN THERAPY. Oh, what, what do you mean I'm the one who has to send him to therapy? Oh my god
Also, Shen Yuan is such a hilarious chaos gremlin. He just sees Bingge being an asshole and screams into a pillow. Boy, same here, but it would scare anyone

ANYWAY. AAAAAAAAA !!!!!!! THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING. I REALLY HOPE YOU LIKED THE CHAPTER!!!! Seriously, how crazy. I didn't think I could write this much until I forced myself to. I mean, YES, I know I can write a crazy amount of words in a short amount of time, but never with a daily "responsibility" it's rewarding and wonderful to take this journey, and I love doing it with all of you. I love you all so much, thanks for joining me in this MHAW
ANYWAY, YOU KNOW!!! KUDO - COMMENT - INTERACTION, I'm on Tumblr, why do I always forget to add it????, THANKS AGAIN, SEE YOU SOON!!!!

Chapter 12: Fourth day of recovery out

Chapter Notes

YOU DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH I LAUGHED WRITING THIS CHAPTER
AS ALWAYS, HEY, YOU ARE THE BEST. THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR ALL YOUR COMMENTS AND FOR JOINING ME ON THIS CRAZY DAILY JOURNEY :D

Chapter warnings: mentions of Bingge's BAD parenting

ENJOY THE CHAPTER :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One of the worst things about being hospitalized, Shen Yuan believes, is that his entire family suddenly decides they're welcome to visit him, no matter how recently they've seen him.

"A-Yuan," his mother says when Shen Yuan opens the door for her after lunch. She's holding a large package, and just because it looks like a gift for Chengle because of its pretty, shiny wrapping, Shen Yuan sighs and lets her in instead of making excuses. "Look at you, those sunken cheeks. And those dark circles under your eyes. How have you been? How is my sweet grandson? Have you both been resting well?"

Shen Yuan leads his mother to the sofa where Chengle is watching Hamtaro, excuses himself to go put something warmer in his room, and points a finger at Luo Binghe.

"*Don't you dare* let my mother see you like that," he says to the damned Demon Emperor, whispering as quietly as he can. His new clothes have arrived, but Luo Binghe hasn't made a damned effort to change after giving them a look of clear disapproval. He's sitting on Shen Yuan's bed, in his cursed meditation position as if all the times Shen Yuan told him there is no cultivation or qi in this world couldn't persuade him to *try.* "I *swear*, if she sees you in those robes, *I'll burn them.*"

Then, he puts on a sweater just like he told his mother he would and returns to the living room. He carries his cane, even though the pain in his muscles is a subtle ache that barely stings instead of hurting.

Luo Chengle is unpacking a pile of Legos on the coffee table. Shen Yuan sits next to him, his heart warmed by his little boy's huge smile.

"Yuan-ge!" Chengle shows him the pieces. "Look, look! We can make a zoo! And a little house!"

“That’s awesome!” Shen Yuan rubbed his back affectionately. Chengle was already kneeling on the floor, just like his mother, quickly fitting pieces together. His mother just looked at him with a sweet, tender smile. “What do you say to your Nainai, baby?”

Luo Chengle seems surprised that he hadn't said this before. Then, with a wide smile, he rushes toward her and gives her a surprising, strong hug. He says: "Thank you, Nainai! Chengle is so happy!". And when Shen Yuan makes eye contact with his mother, her eyes water.

“Aiya, what a sweet boy,” she patted him on the head, squeezing him in an extremely tight hug. “Play, play. Do you like to build, my love? Maybe you could be a great architect, if you enjoy it a lot.”

“Mom,” Shen Yuan sighs, only a little amused. Women like his mom, despite everything, don’t change much, focused on the future and their goals. It had been like that with Shen Yuan in the past, until he realized that no matter how much he wanted it, it’s not like Shen Yuan could be *normal*. “Don’t push it. He’s still very young for that.”

Luo Chengle goes back to playing. There's an instruction manual lying to one side, showing what shapes can be created. Shen Yuan looks at it curiously, wandering between the pictures and the step-by-step instructions for building certain structures. It seems to be a fairly generic 500-piece base game that promises hours and hours of endless fun and being able to build various things. Chengle, of course, doesn't even look at the instructions. The first thing he does is quickly separate a few pieces by color, then he starts stacking them, observing how and where they fit together, a wide smile on his face.

Shen Yuan reaches for his phone to take some photos. A few photos later, and through the phone's camera, when it focuses on his mother's face, almost by accident, he sees her looking behind him, her eyes wide open in shock, a hand covering her mouth, her face clearly *shocked*.

The damn motherfucker.

Shen Yuan is almost certain of what he'll find before he even turns around. He locks his phone and turns around, feeling like if he could dig a hole in the ground and bury himself, he would do it right now. Or, *better yet*, he'd bury the damn motherfucker there, under the concrete until he could regain some face.

Luo Binghe is standing there, and sure enough, he's not wearing his robes. All he's wearing is one of Shen Yuan's towels wrapped around his hips, and it's not even a large one given how *much* of his legs is visible. His hair is a wet mess, dripping onto his shoulders. He seems to have tried to towel dry it, at least, so all he leaves behind are droplets that slide down his broad shoulders and down every visible, exposed muscle in his broad chest.

Shen Yuan lets out a stifled groan, his face burning. What the fuck. What an idiot. What the hell.

The smile Luo Binghe has on his face is charming.

"*Yuan-ge*," he says, his voice raising goosebumps. Shen Yuan clutches the table, unable to find any external strength to stop himself from beating him with his cane. "You didn't tell me we'd have guest. Madam, I apologize. I didn't know you were coming. Let me get dressed, excuse me. What a shame."

Shame. *SHAME*. THE SON OF A–

Luo Binghe leaves and closes the door behind him. Shen Yuan opens his mouth, but between the shame and humiliation burning his face, he actually feels like a damned fish out of water, unable to say a single thing other than a curse, an insult, or something *meaningful.*

His mother is the one who breaks the silence. Her shocked expression turns into something strange just before she bursts into laughter, her cheeks bright pink.

"*Mom*?" Shen Yuan tilts his head, barely able to understand what the hell is going on. Also, actually, a little alarmed. He, in his entire life, had never seen his mother *so blushed.*

Luo Chengle also looks at her with worried eyes.

"Is Nainai good?" he whispers. His mother, at that, only laughs *even louder*, covering her mouth with a hand. She nods, calming her laughter with deep breaths, even wiping away a stray tear from the corner of her eye.

"Ah, darling, don't worry," she says, reaching over to gently pat Chengle's little head. "A-Yuan, really what a shame. And that handsome man? When were you going to introduce us?"

Luo Chengle immediately sulks.

"He's not handsome man," he complains, grimacing in utter disgust. "He's Father-…"

"It's his father," Shen Yuan says quickly, taking Luo Chengle's little hand quickly and carefully. Luo Chengle seems to understand that this is one of those things he shouldn't say with any adults other than Airplane present, so he just nods. He's a sweet and clever boy, but he still looks clearly sulking. Shen Yuan sighs. "He came as a surprise, actually. Today. We didn't expect it."

"I don't like him being here," Luo Chengle protests. He's stopped playing, just sulking in his place. "Can Nainai kick him out? Yuan-ge couldn't."

His mother laughs a little again.

"Don't you like your father, baby?" his mother asks. Chengle shakes his head sulkily. "Why not? Do you want to tell Nainai?"

Luo Chengle looks at him. Shen Yuan sighs, nodding; he's not going to deprive the boy of roasting his father a little with his new grandmother, after all. Isn't it grandmothers' job to pamper and spoil their grandchildren, threaten lapsed fathers like Binghe and make sure they don't turn out to be wretches? Perhaps Luo Binghe could use a little toughness from a female figure he *wouldn't* end up marrying.

“Father is rude,” Luo Chengle begins, his voice low. His pout is a quivering little thing, and Shen Yuan leans toward him, rubbing his back in small, soothing motions. “He never plays with me. He never has time for me. I never see him, and when I do see father, it’s from a distance because he always has more important things to do. But even though he’s busy, he always comes back with new women who are rude and mean and want to give father ugly babies and push him further away. I don’t like him, and now he wants to keep with Yuan-ge and me.”

The expression on his mother's face changes. When Luo Chengle finishes speaking, Shen Yuan suddenly feels scolded, as if he were fifteen years old again and had done something stupid that was too risky for his health.

“Oh, darling,” she says finally, clearly dismayed. Her eyes are sadder now as she looks at Chengle. “That’s not good behavior. My poor boy.”

Luo Chengle nods his head repeatedly. He doesn't look like he's about to cry, even though his pout is big.

“Yuan-ge says father can’t take me away if I don’t want him to. And father hasn’t tried yet,” Chengle says softly. He puts his little hands back on his Legos, but he doesn’t seem as enthusiastic as he speaks in his low, tender voice. “But I don’t want to live with father again. I want to live with Yuan-ge and move out after New Year’s and have a new house just for the two of us. Yuan-ge said I can have a room! I like sleeping with Yuan-ge, though. I like him cuddling me because with Yuan-ge, I never feel lonely.”

Shen Yuan feels that sensation of crying catch in his throat. He clears his throat, but it's his mother who doesn't, delicately wiping a tear away with her hand.

“Ah, my sweet boy,” she coos, leaning closer to ruffle Chengle’s hair. “This Nainai of yours will make sure that father of yours doesn’t take you away. I promise.”

“And Nainai can’t kick him out?” Chengle asks again, pouting. Despite this, her mother laughs.

“I’m afraid not,” she says, and she stares so hard at Shen Yuan that he feels attacked. Well, there’s not much he can do either! He wishes had the strength to kick him out, but his wrist is still sore from slapping him! “But if your Yuan-ge is allowing him to stay, it’s for a reason, my sweet boy. I’m pretty sure he would never allow him to take you away or be rude to you again.”

“That’s true!” says Chengle, and with a wide, clearly malicious grin, he whispers conspiratorially, “Yuan-ge even slapped father! On his face! Father was rude and Yuan-ge” and Chengle, with a wide smile, claps his hands together in a fierce sound that might as well be as good as, or worse than, a slap. Eh. Shen Yuan isn't sure he hit Luo Binghe *that* hard, to tell the truth. “And then he sent him to eat far away! Far away! At this little table while Yuan-ge and I ate in the dining room together! Father can only eat at the same table as Chengle when Chengle wants to. And I don’t! And then we watched Lilo & Stitch. And Father wasn't rude again.”

The boy lets out a jovial laugh, completely satisfied. Shen Yuan tries his best to ignore his mother's slightly incredulous, slightly alarmed stare, even with that accusing raised eyebrow.

“Aiya. Did you really *slap* that man, A-Yuan?” his mother asks, an amused smile on her face. Shen Yuan feels his face heat up a little, but he nods, shrugging. “And I, worried about my sweet boy with that… well, *very*... strong man. I see you have everything under control.”

“Yuan-ge has it!” Luo Chengle says with a radiant smile. “Yuan-ge is the best.”

Shen Yuan sighs, patting his head. Luo Chengle leans against his hand, his sweet, genuine smile shining brightly. The conversation doesn't continue; Chengle seems to have recovered the humor to continue playing, so he begins to build things in strange shapes, fitting them together and trying out different forms. Only after a reasonable amount of time has passed does his mother stand up with an ease enviable for her age and point Shen Yuan toward the dining room to one side. Shen Yuan nods and follows her.

His mother's expression is tense. Only when they're out of earshot of what a child’s normal hearing range should be does his mother lean toward him, holding his hand tightly, and ask: "Do you need a lawyer, honey?"

Shen Yuan finds himself laughing despite everything.

“Mom, everything’s *fine*,” he promises. It’s not like a lawyer can intervene in any functional way, anyway. He’s sure the laws in this world and the PIDW world are so different that they couldn’t even come up with a legal agreement that would work for both universes. “I’ve got it figured out. And if anything else happens, we'll figure out how to make it work. I promise.”

His mother lets out a sigh.

“A-Yuan, he’s a handsome young man, really,” his mother says, and Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Really, of all things, does his mother notice his looks? *It makes sense, too.* He is *Luo Binghe*, it would be a surprise if his mother were to ignore something like that, but still… “Is it really worth going through all this for him?”

Shen Yuan interrupts the exact train of thought.

“Mom, it’s all for *Chengle*,” he says, and his mother’s expression looks almost relieved. Shen Yuan supposes it makes sense; after everything the boy has said about his horrible father, it must be a relief to his mother to hear that he has at least someone on his side to protect him and make sure he’s happy and in a healthy environment. “He’s my… my son. I just… I can’t explain it,” he says, and he looks at one of the walls. He’s even pasted up one of Chengle’s drawings in the dining room, the boy surrounded by a bunch of cute, colorful tigers. There are at least a couple of the tigers that have horns, but Shen Yuan isn’t sure that’s not something that exists in his own world. “I just know he’s mine. I… I knew, I don’t know how, but I saw Chengle and I just knew. He’s my child, my son. I’ll do whatever it takes to see him happy. So be it, well… make sure his horrible father really is *decent* to him.”

His mother has a soft, bittersweet smile on her face. Then she sighs.

“But A-Yuan, seriously, a *womanizer*?” she complains. Shen Yuan snorts. Well, discounting the wives part, *he supposes* Luo Binghe really would fall into the womanizer category. “I know some men like him tend to date a lot of women because, you know…” his mother’s expression is vague. Shen Yuan nods, shrugging. Anything to keep his mother away from the concept of Luo Binghe having a harem. “I just mean, it’s not suitable for a child to be exposed to that. He won’t continue it *here*, will he?”

“God, no,” Shen Yuan says immediately, horrified. “He wouldn’t *dare*. I’ll rip his balls off if I see him approach any woman near again. If he wants to stay in this house, he won't dare. Seriously, he can’t be *that* shameless…”

His mother laughs a little. Her shoulders tremble. Before Shen Yuan realizes it, she's pulling him into a hug. He feels stiff, tense in her arms. He struggles a bit to respond, hugging his mother, patting her back.

“Sometimes,” she says, her voice clearly emotional, “I look at you and don’t realize you’ve really grown so much. I guess this old mother of yours is afraid of letting her fragile baby go and being left empty-handed with no one to spoil and care for.”

“You still have Meimei,” Shen Yuan protests, and his mother laughs.

“Oh, your Meimei was born an adult,” she complains. Shen Yuan supposes he has to agree with her; even if his Meimei had a childish and impulsive attitude, she had always had clear ideas and decisions, and greater autonomy than all her older brothers. He supposes it’s true that women mature sooner. “I’m really grateful to you for bringing Chengle to me. You fill my elderly heart with purpose.”

“You’re not that old either,” Shen Yuan complains, sighing. Then he looks toward the door. Luo Chengle seems to be deep in thought, the tip of his tongue peeking out from between his lips as he continues to construct. There’s no sign of Luo Binghe, but Shen Yuan guesses, it makes sense. He guesses that the Great and Mighty Venerable Emperor Luo Binghe didn’t appreciate hearing his son speak ill of him. A good kick to his pride. “Ah, Mom, will you stay with Chengle for a moment? I want to make sure that his father is still alive and hasn’t accidentally touched anything electrical while his hands are wet. It would be *so* tragic to be left with full custody because of that…”

His mother bursts out laughing. She nods and lets Shen Yuan go.

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Shen Yuan has no idea what he's expecting upon entering his room, but seeing Luo Binghe fully dressed in modern clothes—which, damn it, do they need to fit *so* tightly? Shen Yuan is damn sure he even bought a size up to avoid just that! *How* is that red turtleneck sweater so tight across the chest and taut in the back? It should be fucking *illegal* and against the sizing regulations to sell something unfairly small for a larger size—sitting in his desk chair using his computer's turned-off screen as a mirror and with two different hairbrushes tangled in his hair *is not* a thing.

There are claws in his fingers, a red zuiyin glowing on his forehead, and one of his lower eyelids is visibly throbbing. His entire face is pale, a grimace that seems to fly between frustration and sharp contempt.

Shen Yuan lets out a laugh.

The look Luo Binghe gives him is *poisonous.*

“Shizun *said* this was *useful* for this Lord’s hair. *Shizun dared to lie* even when…”

“Shut up,” Shen Yuan complains, coming closer. He’s really made a pretty big mess. He’s clearly *tried* using two different hairbrushes, but without the slightest idea how to use them. “You don’t use these kinds of hairbrushes like this. Now, stay still.”

“*Don’t you dare…”*

Luo Binghe lets out an almost animal-like noise when Shen Yuan pulls at his hair. He doesn't even do it harshly: he wraps his hand around the base, near the scalp, making sure he can pull on one of the hairbrushes tangled in his hair without the tug hurting his roots. Luo Binghe's entire body language is threatening, somewhat tense, but Shen Yuan can only sense pathetic amusement. Look at him there, the great and powerful Demon Emperor, defeated by two soft, curly-haired brushes.

He carefully pulls off one of the hairbrushes. When Shen Yuan wraps his hand around the base of the other hairbrush, doing the same, Luo Binghe doesn't complain, although the tension in his body could have turned him into a stone statue. At least the clothes are flexible and haven't split at the seams. Shen Yuan will leave a good review for the seller.

“Yeah,” he says. He looks at the amount of creams Luo Binghe has left on his desk. Some of them look like they’ve been opened just to sniff and then left aside. Others still have their plastic wrappers, clearly covered in scratches, so they couldn’t be properly opened with their safety labels intact. “Aiya, what a mess. At least your hair is still wet, but not *that* wet. I can’t work with this like that.”

Luo Binghe's hair is frankly a mess. It's clear that Luo Binghe has tried to brush it the same way he uses his jade combs, even trying to straighten it, treating it the same way he treats straight hair, which has only managed to puff it out in all directions, at least in the areas where it hasn't tangled. Shen Yuan sighs and leaves it there, heading for the bathroom. There's only a short hallway from his room to the bathroom, and it doesn't take him long to return with the spray bottle of water and baby detangling product.

“What are you-…”

Shen Yuan presses the dispenser shot and sprays water onto his face. Luo Binghe stares directly at him, absolutely horrified. The zuiyin on his forehead glows *brighter*.

“It’s not poison,” he says, as Luo Binghe dries his face with the towel hanging over his shoulders. It’s too small, and Shen Yuan *prays* it’s not the same towel he used to wrap his

hips, because damn, how *unhygienic*. “It’s water with a detangling product from Chengle. *I think* it’s argan oil, if you’re curious. Now stay still.”

He sprays more product on his head. On one side, he finds the sad, tangled braid.

“*Don’t you dare,*” Luo Binghe hisses. His hand is icy cold, stopping him. “*If* you dare steal it…”

“What’s your obsession with being stolen, huh?” Shen Yuan protests. He sets it aside. Fine, he’ll have a pathetic, messy braid. What does Shen Yuan care, anyway? “I won’t touch it, don’t worry.”

Luo Binghe sulks. Just for a second, seeing his frown and the way his mouth curls, Shen Yuan has to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. It's clear that Chengle, despite the vast differences between his cute little boy and this disheveled Emperor, is clearly his son. They both have the same kind of sulky expression.

Only when his hair is dripping with product does Shen Yuan start separating the layers. He won't do a full styling—in fact, he doesn't think they have the time for it. He's sure he can only spend a predetermined amount of time out of Chengle's sight *and* with Luo Binghe before the boy starts to get too anxious. So all he does is separate the hair into several substantial sections to fully detangle it, spraying more product each time he runs the brush through a particularly dry area, loading his hands with a little of the lightweight curl styling cream and working it through the hair only when he can no longer find any tangles.

“Once you apply the cream, do this,” he said, squeezing the hair from the bottom up. “Carefully. And without claws.”

He does this a few times, strand by strand. He runs another hairbrush through the strands again, wrapping them around the brush and combing downward. He takes exaggerated care with that messy braid, and when the curls begin to take a proper shape, the braid easily blends in with them.

“Fine,” he says, putting the hairbrushes aside. Like every time, his fingers are cold and somewhat numb. “Now all you need is a hairdryer, but your hair is too dry to add heat without a heat protectant, and honestly, we don’t have time for it. So just let it air dry. It’s not like you can catch a cold, is it?” he asks, half joking, half serious. While the mental image of a Heavenly Demon *catching* a cold is as funny as it is worrying, he really doesn’t want to have to deal with it.

“As if something like a *cold* could affect this Lord,” Luo Binghe complains. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes, taking the towel from the fool’s shoulders to dry his hands. He sighs, putting away the products and cutting the plastic wrapper off the creams that Luo Binghe couldn’t open easily where the small arrow indicates.

“I'm glad about that. There are no healing flowers in this world, and my brother stole my Tylenol,” he says, shrugging as he gathers his things. “I'll put all this in the bathroom. If you need help next time, *just ask.* Don't be a jerk.”

Luo Binghe doesn't reply. Shen Yuan assumes he's fine, anyway; not that he'd expected the man to thank him. A son-stealer and braid-thief, he doesn't even want to imagine if he accidentally ruins Luo Binghe's hair by using too much heat without the heat protectant. No, thanks. He won't be going near that hair again unless it's a damn emergency.

He puts away all the products and hairbrushes. He returns to the living room when Luo Chengle is clearly getting uncomfortable, because his small frown changes to a jovial, joyful expression when Shen Yuan approaches.

“Yuan-ge!” he squeals and throws himself at his legs. “I built a house! Look, look!”

It's a small house. It's nothing more than a cube of multi-colored Legos with an open roof revealing a semi-structure inside, but Shen Yuan can't help but think it's beautiful. He takes photos of Chengle holding the house, photos of the house, and the boy bounces happily on the sofa while Shen Yuan (and, of course, his beloved Nainai) takes several photos of him happily with his Legos.

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By the time Luo Binghe leaves the room a while later, even Chengle is in a better mood and no longer looks at him with complete distaste. Shen Yuan officially (and fully clothed) introduces Luo Binghe to his mother, who, unlike her initial charm, remains stoic and cold as a stone statue. Her smile is a false courtesy, and far from flattering him, she suddenly seems quite capable of pulling him by the ear and dragging him out of the apartment if Luo Binghe does or says anything she doesn't like.

Shen Yuan is pretty sure that Luo Binghe deserves it.

She leaves a little later, hugging Shen Yuan and Chengle, and giving Luo Binghe a *clear* warning. She's charmingly kind all the time, of course, and Luo Binghe never lets up on that, but Shen Yuan recognizes both manipulators with masks of smiles, and he almost believes he is giving this round won to his mother.

Luo Chengle, only slightly reluctant, lets Luo Binghe take a look at the constructions he's been making when his Nainai leaves. He hides behind Shen Yuan's leg the entire time while Luo Binghe watches the small, colorful Lego constructions.

“What is this?” he asks, pointing to an uneven structure.

“It’s… a tiger house,” Luo Chengle says softly. Shen Yuan gently pats him on the head, urging him to continue. Luo Chengle has explained this to Shen Yuan before, and Luo Binghe has heard it clearly even from a room away; Shen Yuan has no doubt about it. Still, Luo Binghe looks at Chengle expectantly. “It’s… for them to sleep. And play. They can go in there,” he points to the small opening. “And they come out there,” he points to another small opening, but higher up. This opening has strange stairs that rise up to the ceiling and protrude from the outside of the wall. “And the sloping roof. For them to sunbathe.”

Luo Binghe's expression is so intense it's uncomfortable. Shen Yuan is ready to slap again if necessary, and Luo Binghe seems to know this, because he makes an effort to say: "It must be

for very small tigers."

Luo Chengle looks surprised. Then he nods his head up and down. Slowly at first. Quickly after that.

“Small,” he repeats. His own small voice sounds fragile, and Shen Yuan wonders if he’s ever had the chance to show Luo Binghe one of his toys before. Shen Yuan wonders if, in the past, Luo Binghe would have ever approached him willingly, curious, wanting to know what his son is doing. *Any* of his sons. “Smaller than my tigers. Like this,” and he pinches his fingers together into a tiny size.

Luo Binghe nods. Shen Yuan sighs deeply.

Well, he can't be angry that Luo Binghe is *trying*. That's what Shen Yuan demanded of him, anyway. Chengle's happiness is the most important thing, the paramount thing in the situation. A small approach is a step closer, and a step, no matter how small, is *still* a step.

Shen Yuan pats Chengle's back a couple of times, urging him to sit back down on the cushion by the table. Shen Yuan hasn't been standing for long, but he can feel the exhaustion hitting him. Without a sharp pain in his muscles from Luo Binghe's unexpected and spontaneous qi transfusion in the early morning, he's barely been using his cane. And while it's easy to move around without it if he is not in pain, exhaustion always sets in.

“Why don’t you show your father the other buildings while I order some hot chocolate and a cream roll-cake?” he asks. Luo Chengle hesitates, pouting profusely. “I won’t move from here, I promise.”

He takes a seat on the sofa, smiling at him. Sitting down is a welcome relief. Luo Chengle seems to consider it, but ultimately agrees. Then, Shen Yuan browses the menu at the nearby cafe, ordering two large cups of hot chocolate and strawberry cream roll-cakes, Chengle's favorites. He looks with a bit of sad foolish longing at the section of all the drinks he can't order until his stomach deigns to be a functioning stomach, makes his purchase, and sits silently watching.

Luo Chengle hesitates every two or three words. It's as if he's searching for the right way, the *proper* way to present each of his achievements. It's far from the excited, childlike pride with which he presented his small buildings to Shen Yuan, probably because he fears that, in his father's eyes, none of them will be seen as achievements. Shen Yuan supposes he should give Luo Binghe a *minimum* of credit so far: while he hasn't said anything *overtly* positive, all he's done is ask a lot of questions and let Chengle do the talking.

He's not entirely sure whether Luo Binghe is actually listening to him, or paying attention, but the fact is that even if Chengle doesn't exactly flinch or look comfortable, he also doesn't look like he's about to cry, scream, or hide. When his order comes with the bell, Shen Yuan looks at Luo Binghe allusively.

“This Lord doesn’t have to-…”

“It’s food for your son and *you*,” he says with a firm voice. Luo Binghe’s eyebrow and mouth twitch, the suspended bad mood returning. Shen Yuan can almost *hear* his megalomaniacal mind repeating the speech about *how someone inferior to this venerable one dares to order, blah, blah, blah.* Honestly, he feels only a little pity. He doesn’t forget how sweet and sensitive Luo Binghe was in his white lotus era. Ah, why couldn’t he have stayed that way? … Ah, right, the Abyss. Shen Yuan clears his throat. “Open that door, smile at the delivery boy with that charm of yours, thank him and wish him a good day. Tell him he’ll get a tip for the app because you don’t have cash. And if I have to move from here, Chengle will get a double portion.”

Luo Binghe obeys. It's both a surprise and a joy. As soon as Luo Binghe gets up from the sofa, Luo Chengle jumps onto him, hugging Shen Yuan tightly.

“There, there,” Shen Yuan coos. “Hasn’t my boy been so sweet and brave? Showing him all his pretty buildings. Wasn’t that entertaining?”

Luo Chengle hesitates. Then he quickly shakes his head and continues to take refuge in Shen Yuan's embrace.

“I don’t like it,” Luo Chengle complains softly. “I don’t want to like it. I don’t want it to hurt later.”

“Hey,” Shen Yuan rubbed his back very gently. “It’s okay, sweetheart. I understand.”

He rocks Luo Chengle in his arms. The boy trembles a little, snuggles closer, and Shen Yuan keeps repeating how well he's done, how beautiful all his buildings are, and how very, very proud he is of him. Only when Luo Binghe returns with the food in his hands, which he leaves in its paper bag in an empty space on the table, does Shen Yuan place a soft, small kiss on the top of the boy's head.

“Time for something delicious to eat, what do you think, baby?”

Chengle nods. He reluctantly breaks away from the hug, but Shen Yuan unpacks his things from his bag. The two cups of hot chocolate are quite warm for having been brought in through very cold day, and when he unpacks the three small boxes, Luo Binghe frowns at him.

“Shizun said if he had to move, Chengle would get *my* food,” he complains. Shen Yuan bites his tongue to keep from laughing.

“Not at all,” he says simply. “Luo Binghe, you’re an adult, and you’re obviously not going to fill yourself with the same portion as a child. But Chengle is a sweet tooth, isn’t he?” And the child snuggles up to his side, laughing a little. “He wouldn’t have minded having one portion and half of yours. Although the roll cakes are very sweet, and we don’t want the baby to get a stomach ache.”

Chengle almost squirms in his lap when Shen Yuan tickles his stomach. It's a relief to find a healthy, baby tummy there, far from the initially too-thin tension. Shen Yuan is sure there will

come a time when he won't be able to have the child sit on his lap without his legs falling asleep and aching, but he's willing to make the sacrifice to see Chengle healthy and happy.

Luo Binghe looks at the two small boxes stacked in front of him with a frankly incomprehensible expression.

“Shizun wasn’t going to take my food away to give it to him,” he says. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Is *that what* he’s worried about? Stupid. Besides, what kind of worry is that, for fuck’s sake? He’s supposed to be a *father*. A father doesn’t fight with his own children over his food.

“Ridiculous,” he complains, clicking his tongue. “Luo Binghe, I may *not want* you in my apartment given the fact that, well, you arrived uninvited and simply decided to stay, but as long as you’re here and seeking Chengle’s happiness, I won’t object. You’re *my* guest” he shrugs. Luo Binghe seems to be looking at the dessert boxes as if they’re complex artifacts in an unknown language. Honestly, a rather intense overthinker, in Shen Yuan’s opinion. “I won’t leave you without food, even if it’s just dessert.”

“Yuan-ge is kind,” says Chengle. Shen Yuan is about to say something to him when he notices, to his surprise, that Chengle is looking in Luo Binghe’s direction when he speaks. “The most kind.”

Luo Binghe finally peels his eyes away from the dessert boxes. Shen Yuan is already ready to throw a pillow or, at the very least, a Lego building at him if Luo Binghe so much as says something awful in his son's direction. He stands with his hand outstretched in the air as Luo Binghe's gaze becomes much, much less intense than it had been a moment ago.

“Yes,” he says finally. His eyebrows are only slightly raised, and something about his face looks *almost* fragile. Shen Yuan feels as if he’s looking behind the mask he’s long imposed on himself, behind the Demon Emperor, at the *Luo Binghe* who is suddenly staring back at him, something strange burning into his expression, something that feels as if with that single word he’s understood something Shen Yuan has no idea of. “He… is. Kind.”

Then, Luo Binghe leans over to take the cup of hot chocolate Shen Yuan has ordered for him. He doesn't say anything else as his hands dwarf the disposable cup, and Shen Yuan sighs. Well, it's just as well this way. He's not sure all this stress is good for his poor, pathetic stomach. And all for dessert! Shen Yuan sighs, hugging Chengle as the boy settles between his legs to eat and enjoy the hot sweet chocolate.

His sweet boy. After all that tension, Shen Yuan knows his sweet boy deserves it. And he supposes, with a grin, that he can also count it to Luo Binghe as a damn reward for *trying.* At least. At the very least.

He's not too sure whether to feel glad that Luo Binghe is trying or sulk that he's trying *just because someone had to force him to do it.*

Chapter End Notes

Mama Shen: I see
Mama Shen: What a strange situationship you have with your son's father, honey. And I understand that you *think* you can fix him, but as long as you're clear about prioritizing my grandson and not your horrible boyfriend, I'm supporting you and you wrongs :)

Chengle: Yuan-ge is the most kind :3
LBG, having revelations: ... oh

I SO ENJOYED WRITING THIS CHAPTER. Only Shen Yuan is capable of having a conversation with his mother and listening to everything she says while simultaneously not understanding anything. Also, "How to Say Ambiguous Things That Can Be Interpreted in Multiple Ways" 101 by laoshi Shen Yuan. I love him, my oblivious boy, he's so silly. Ah, Mama Shen having the revelation about how gay her son is- she was definitely laughing at winning the bet with her husband, don't worry

SY saw the feral dog Bingge and sprayed water in his face. He did what I think at least 99% of you would have wanted to do in the same situation. Welcome to raising a child and a feral dog, now he'll have to take him to the park and put a collar on him (and a muzzle if he tries to bite other suitors I mean dogs)

BINGGE TAKING BABY STEPS!!!! He's trying. Is it for the right reasons? Does this man ACTUALLY HAVE right reasons? God knows (Airplane might know. But hey, only in the same way a parent knows their wayward child and knows what trouble they're going to get into)

OMG, IT FEELS LIKE A FUN RIDE SHARING IDEAS WITH MY FRIENDS. I'VE ADOPTED YOU AS MY FRIENDS ON THIS JOURNEY AND I HOPE YOU'RE ENJOYING IT AS MUCH AS I AM!!!! Seriously, thank you so so so so much for joining me on this enormous ramble. Thanks for reading!! And I genuinely hope you enjoyed the chapter! You know you know, kudos comments interactions, I'm here!!! hugs and kisses, THANK YOU AND GRACIAS!!
SEE YOU SOOOON :3

Chapter 13: Fifth - sixth day out: plans and bad mood

Chapter Notes

THIS CHAPTER *SQUEEZE SCREEN* FELT SO EASY AND DIFFICULT AT THE SAME TIME, I DON'T KNOW HOW TO EXPLAIN IT
Sometimes looking too deeply into the feelings of an abandoned child makes me feel and drift back in time in a way that I should consult my psychologist, but let's suppose this counts as therapy *cries*

Chapter warnings: emotions, more mentions of Bingge's bad parenting, more internalized ableism from Shen Yuan. Someday he'll talk about his emotions, that day won't be today

ENJOY THE CHAPTER! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cohabiting with Luo Binghe where for some reason he finds himself being a sort of moral guide of what it means to be a good father means that Shen Yuan has *too many* things to think about, things to do, things to plan, and too much time against him to do it all at a fast pace that fits the damn schedule of things that Shen Yuan will not be able to avoid.

For example, in his family chat group, Jiu-ge (clearly Yue-ge, given his polite words) asks if they've decided where Christmas dinner will be held this year, and whether it's going to be a more formal dinner or if everyone will bring their own meals for share. It's not as if his family celebrated Christmas in a pompous way—in fact, Shen Yuan is sure that at some point his mother only made them decorate the tree and exchange gifts so she could take pictures of them to keep, another excuse to spoil them by emptying her pockets and giving them lovely childhood memories to cherish. That's all it had been, always: a comfortable dinner, pictures by his mother's Christmas tree, which they would occasionally help decorate. Sometimes, when Shen Yuan's health was on the upswing (which wasn't often, given the time of year), they would go out to eat.

Shen Yuan figures he'll be able to eat something other than broth by then. Maybe soft purees, which doesn't make it any better, but at least he'll be able to digest something other than clear broth, and maybe with a little flavor. Maybe even sweet pudding if it's mild enough.

Meimei offers up her apartment to host the dinner party, since it’s the largest of the downtown (and the closest to the hospital in case of an emergency with Shen Yuan, but no one mentions that). Shen Yuan supposes it makes perfect sense beyond the caution factor given his recent hospitalization: Meimei has the largest apartment, and she’s the one who decorates it best for all those brand photos, with a big colorful tree and all that. Their parents

agree, saying that in that case, they could all bring something to eat and gather there to share so she doesn't have to deal with the cooking.

It's not like Meimei knows how to cook, anyway.

Ming-ge just sends thumbs up throughout the conversation. Shen Yuan wishes he could do the same. He confirms that he's fine with it being at Meimei's house and, sighing, asks if, in addition to Chengle and Airplane (who Jiu-ge *had apparently approves* during his hospital stay—damn chaotic surprise—and was already in mind for dinner as soon as Shen Yuan mentioned that he had no family in Beijing), he can bring *another* friend.

Meimei immediately agrees, the more the better to improve the variety of food. Shen Yuan isn't surprised when he starts receiving tons of messages, one after another, from her demanding that Shen Yuan tell she *who* and so she pretends to know him before Ming-ge or Jiu-ge decide to be annoying about it.

Shen Yuan quickly texts her that he's Chengle's father, and Meimei sends a few too many "!!!!!!!" in her personal chat while, in the group chat, she sends a "I hope the baby-papa is willing to bring some good food :)" which is perhaps not the best thing she could send to the group, because now it's Shen Jiu (who clearly is Shen Jiu this time and not Yue Qi with his phone) who starts texting him demanding *answers*.

Shen Yuan sighs. He really has too much to deal with.

He writes a letter. It's a *formal* letter, with all the formal language that implies, using the best expensive paper he could find, and even using one of the fountain pens his father had given him when he passed his gaokao years before. It's a miracle it still works, and even more so, that it has ink cartridges that haven't dried out.

In the letter, he writes to Liu Mingyan that he hasn't spoken to Chengle about her letter yet and apologizes for that, but that he will soon. Luo Chengle truly feels sad, replaced, and displaced by Mingyan's situation and the new baby. But Shen Yuan doesn't blame her. He apologizes for having blamed her when he initially found out how badly Luo Chengle was doing in the palace.

Now that *their* child has told him, and with the medical knowledge of Shen Yuan's time, he understands that Liu Mingyan needs far more help than she'll be able to get there, that it's not just heart demons or something that can be resolved through meditation or tinctures. And Shen Yuan, determined, promises to find a way to help her.

He writes another letter to Sha Hualing, just as formal, explaining everything he has been able to research about what postpartum depression can be and how close circles could help (considering that at least Sha Hualing seems quite close to Liu Mingyan, surprisingly), but he also adds the whole pile of new pictures of Chengle, printed out with all their descriptions on the back.

He also adds the single drawing where Chengle drew himself in robes riding a creature that, God help him, Shen Yuan *prays* is only a child's imagination because he is sure that this

creature, even so childishly drawn, is an Abyssal Red Sabretooth, and that it should *not* be anywhere near any child.

And when he has both letters ready, he writes a third one, somewhat hesitant at first but determined right after, and adds to his third letter a specific list of the huge amount of books he has just bought, Simplified to Traditional Chinese dictionary included just in case, explaining the recommended reading order and requesting that any kind of questions for understanding external topics, associations or secondary explanations be written and sent so that Shen Yuan can gladly look it up in his *cloud library* (if that is what he could call the internet without upsetting the xianxia mentality too much, that is).

“Luo Binghe,” he says, standing in front of him once he’s ready. Luo Binghe seems to have taken over the couch in a way Shen Yuan wouldn’t have considered possible, but hey, he never considered it possible to have Luo-Fucking-Binghe in his damn apartment actively wanting to stay. “I know you burned the Cang Qiong Sect to the ground and all. But let me ask you, is Mu Qingfang still alive?”

Luo Binghe stares at him. He's holding a book—actually, it's a manga, Shen Yuan admits. *Why the hell* is he reading manga? He doesn't even want to ask what it is; his mind can barely cope with what he's dealing with right now, let alone what else—which he closes and sets aside.

Shen Yuan sighs. He's preparing for yet another of those tirades of “*Shizun*, *seeking information for all his vile plans, blah, blah, blah”*, so when Luo Binghe replies with a simple "He is," Shen Yuan is almost visibly surprised. In fact, it's almost shocking that Luo Binghe answers without going into a thousand different matters separately.

He clears his throat, nodding.

“Do you know where he is? I mean, is it possible you could contact him in the immediate future?”

Luo Binghe nods. His expression remains devoid of resentment and contempt, which is somewhere between surprise and a milestone worthy of celebration. Shen Yuan rubs his forehead, taking a deep breath. He really, *really* needs someone else to take care of everything. Sometime. Or a nap. Maybe he'll take a nap some other time, with Chengle, in the afternoon. That sounds like *a very* good idea.

“Good,” Shen Yuan sighs and points to the box of books. “I need you to contact him and get these books to him. You’ll have to explain to him that there’s another world with more advanced medical knowledge, and that he needs to educate himself on all of this” He waves his hand allusively. He’s sure that among the more than thirty books, there must be at least *something* useful “and could help Mingyan in a way that someone from your world couldn’t. Yes, you destroyed his sect; he’ll object out of pride and entitlement, but you could make a deal with him or something, right? I can get him books or medical things to experiment with if he needs them. Whatever it takes to help Mingyan.”

Luo Binghe seems to be considering this. He reaches out and takes one of the books from the box. It's a book on the fundamentals of psychology—Shen Yuan has added a damned book by

Freud among them all, *just* for reference, and adding a handwritten note that it's *not* entirely based on that because it's theoretical trash that only needs to be understood as establishing a basis for refutation that other psychologists and fucking psychoanalysts have based on to expand their studies based precisely on refuting all of his damned theories—and Luo Binghe looks at it with narrowed eyes. He's more curious than hostile, and Shen Yuan exhales in relief when he, after snooping through a few pages, shrugs and nods.

“If that’s what Shizun wants,” Luo Binghe mutters. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Truly, the man is beyond repair.

“It’s not about what I want,” he said, pointing to the small hallway that leads to the bathroom, where Luo Chengle is taking his bubble bath with warm water and a pile of rubber duckies. “It’s for *his* good. Every child *needs* their mother. If I can help Mingyan get better for him and her baby, I will.”

“Shizun is *kind,*” Luo Binghe says. There’s a strange undertone to his words. Luo Binghe puts the book back in the box, shifting as he settles, bringing one ankle up to cross it and rest it on his knee. It’s an extremely narcissistic pose, in Shen Yuan’s opinion, more suited to showing off how those damn pants fit his thighs. *Seriously*. Shen Yuan hadn’t noticed *how* firm they were with all the layers of robes. “I wonder… what Shizun wants in return.”

Luo Binghe says it with that kind of soft voice, like the scraping of a predator's nails along the road before sprinting after its prey. It's clearly a playful, provocative thing that should clearly make Shen Yuan roll his eyes and threaten him with his cane.

However, well…

“Actually,” he says, “my younger sister, whom you *won’t* dare seduce because Chengle will disown you and I will *murder* you and I will *learn to cook* with your body, is organizing a Christmas dinner. I’ll explain what Christmas is to you *later*. Anyway” he clears his throat “everyone in my family will be bringing food. You’ll also are invited because Chengle is the new kid in my family and will have presents, so you’re going to get him a birthday-sized gift that you can present to my family as something that doesn’t look like it’s from *your* world,” he warns.

Luo Binghe’s eyebrows raise higher and higher the more Shen Yuan talks. He figures exchanging a kind act for Luo Binghe being *nicer* to Chengle shouldn’t be something he should have to exchange in the first place, but what the hell. He just wants Chengle to have a nice Christmas and be happy, even if he has to negotiate with his father in the middle of it.

“And if you could cook something for share with my family without your blood parasites, well,” Shen Yuan smile as gentle as possible “you’d make my mother and Chengle very happy.”

Luo Binghe seems to consider this. Then, with a smile that doesn't look so plastic and is three times as terrifying for that reason alone, Luo Binghe nods.

“If Shizun wishes to continue his altruism, don’t see why this Lord can’t allow it,” he says. Shen Yuan now rolls his eyes. He collapses onto the sofa beside him as his leg begins to feel

slightly sore, sighing. Not having his multiple doses of painkillers and being on less than half of his usual dosage really isn't doing his body any good, as far as pain and exhaustion go.

"Who are you calling Shizun" he complains again, with a moan. It's frustrating every time—yes, there is a resemblance, he's not an *idiot*. He's looked in the mirror after seeing Shen Qingqiu's dead face in that nightmare, and while it doesn't do his ego or self-esteem any good, yes, he can see the *similarity*! No need to keep rubbing it in! "Seriously, Luo Binghe. I don't understand what's on your mind. Stop calling me that, because you're *definitely* not going to call me that around my family. If you keep calling me Shizun in front of them, I'll feel entitled to take over and kick you out the window. And my sister lives on the twentieth floor. You're *not* going to like the fall."

Luo Binghe's expression turns into one of miserable mockery; even if Shen Yuan had hoped to annoy him, the truth is that the dark amusement on his face isn't attacked, but almost incredulous. Shen Yuan can almost read the acidic humor in his mouth before Luo Binghe replies, "Ah, but this Emperor has experience with falls. This Lord bet it won't be *that* bad."

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes, though he can't stop his own mouth from curving into a half-smile. Damn bastard. He's seriously making him laugh.

"Ridiculous," he mutters, nonetheless. "I'd think Luo Binghe would have more of an instinct for self-preservation. Just avoid calling me Shizun around my family, and we'll avoid having to kick you down."

He supposes the fact that Luo Binghe is smiling is a relief. It's not like he's being serious, anyway—even if he feels capable of doing outrageous things like, well, hitting him with his cane or slapping him again if he deserves it, even Shen Yuan has *limits*. And even if he's furious about Luo Binghe's poor parenting, the fact is that the poor idiot has already had enough falls and tragedies in his life.

"So," Luo Binghe says, his voice only slightly softer. It's the kind of tone that's meant to be charming, playful, and that alone gives Shen Yuan a bad feeling. "What should this Lord call Shizun?" Luo Binghe turns in his seat, looking at him. He's wearing a black turtleneck sweater that, by contrast, makes his skin look paler. A jade-pale face with the inky shadow of his eyelashes as he squints his eyes just a little, his playful smile tugging at his mouth as he leans closer to him like he's fucking *hunting him*. "Yuan-ge?" he murmurs, while Shen Yuan feels a nasty chill creep down his spine. "*A-Yuan?"*

Shen Yuan hits him hard on the knee with his cane before Luo Binghe can even get close. What the fuck. What fucking moment did that damn bastard get *so close?* Ha! HA. Shen Yuan supposes he should stop comparing him to wild beasts in his head; for a moment, like a panther, Luo Binghe had almost been crouching over him as if he wanted to hunt him. Damn crazy.

"Yuan-ge is fine," he reluctantly agrees. "My mother has heard you call me that. It should work."

Luo Binghe's hand is clenched on his thigh—seriously, how come all his clothes are still so tight? Shen Yuan bought *extra sizes*—as if he wants to take Shen Yuan's cane and snap it in

two. Shen Yuan moves it away slowly and carefully, as if moving it away quickly will achieve the exact opposite and make Luo Binghe's attention go to it, snapping it like a twig, like a damn cat when something moves quickly in its line of sight.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan looks at him with all the contempt he can muster in his body. Luo Binghe, the damned, enormous M, just smiles chillingly. “*Yuan-ge*.”

“You’re going to waste my name,” he complains. He uses his cane to help himself stand. Shit, that muscle is seriously in a bad mood today. Shen Yuan supposes it’s because of the wetness and the cold, so he can’t expect anything less. At least it’s not unbearably painful. He’ll be able to deal with it without going crazy. “Please do as I asked. It’s necessary for Mingyan and Chengle. And I also wrote these letters, huh,” he forces himself to move to catch them, now that he has Luo Binghe’s confirmation. He picks them up and carries them to the table along with the box of books and the letter for Mu Qingfang. “This is for Mu Qingfang, but this,” he points to the letters, “one is for Sha Hualing and the other is for Liu Mingyan. I even put different colored tapes on them,” and touches the outside of the envelope. He doesn't have too many washi-tapes, just some that his sister left behind or simply gave him to decorate his pillboxes, but he's glad he got a red one and a pale-purple one even if he hasn't had a chance to use them before. Adequate.

“This Lord can identify which is which perfectly,” Luo Binghe says, with something that *almost* sounds like humor. Shen Yuan snorts, sitting back down. “Then, this Emperor will carry out Shizun’s… errand, as he so graciously requested.”

Shen Yuan snorts. He covers his face with a pillow, but Luo Binghe snatches it away before he can scream into it. Shen Yuan crosses his arms, letting his head fall back against the back of the sofa and looking away from Luo Binghe, staring up at the ceiling. Seriously, he can't even have fun terrifying him with screams anymore.

“Yuan-ge,” Luo Binghe says, correcting that *Shizun* from his mouth, that strange smile curving his lips, and handing the pillow back to him. Shen Yuan sighs, but he no longer has a frustrating reason to scream about now, so he just lets it go.

After gathering his robes and after filling his sleeves with the books and letters, Luo Binghe summons his creepy-weirdo sword and opens a portal to go, still dressed in modern clothes. Shen Yuan notes, only as a ridiculous glimpse, that Luo Binghe has left through a portal to his palace wearing socks that, he presumes through carelessness or a lack of attention, appear to be a different color.

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Luo Binghe doesn't return for the rest of the day. By the next day, Luo Chengle is *in a very good mood* just because of that fact. So much so that Shen Yuan is pained to have to ruin it even a little.

“Is Father the Emperor not coming back?” he asks when Shen Yuan serves him his food. There are lots of baby carrots on his vegetable plate, along with peas and rice, and rich chicken pieces with thick gravy. Luo Chengle seems much more excited about his father’s absence than about having a large selection of his favorite foods, which is already quite a lot.

“He’ll be back,” Shen Yuan says, to Chengle’s big pout. Ah, Shen Yuan would pout too if he could. “He’s gone to take care of some very important matters.”

“That’s what he *always* does,” Luo Chengle complains, his sigh too heavy and sad for his small body. “He’s around for a few days, then he’s *gone*. Off to do *more important* things.”

Luo Chengle stabs one of the pieces of chicken quite hard with his two chopsticks together. Shen Yuan places his hand on top of the boy's before he starts making a mess of sauce everywhere.

“This time he’ll be back,” he says softly, “and it’s for something really important. I asked him to do it.”

Luo Chengle's sullen expression falters a little. Then, he sighs and puffs out his cheeks, nodding his head and stuffing his mouth with food. Shen Yuan mimics him with his ugly broth, and only a moment later, when Luo Chengle has eaten a little, does he say: "Is it because of Mom?"

Shen Yuan sighs and nods. Luo Chengle now looks more sad than sulky. Normal under the circumstances, he supposes.

“We can talk about it after lunch,” he says. Chengle shakes his head.

“I don’t want to,” he says in a low voice. “I don’t like it. When I think about Mom, it hurts.”

Shen Yuan has to restrain himself from holding his chest and checking that his heart doesn't just fall out.

“I know, baby,” he whispers. “But sometimes, it has to hurt a little so it can heal. Like when I was in the hospital and they kept putting needles in,” he explains, as gently as he can. Luo Chengle nods, still looking sad. “It hurt, but it was meant to heal.”

“And it won’t hurt anymore?” he asks, his beautiful eyes sad. “I don’t like it.”

“It might take a little while,” Shen Yuan explains, as best he can. “But little by little. Okay, sweetie?”

Chengle puffs out a deep breath and exhales, puffing out his cheeks. Even when he's sad, he's the most adorable and brave little boy in the world, nodding his head and continuing to eat. Shen Yuan imitates him, forcing himself to finish the broth.

Even if it's normal for him to lose weight by staying on a liquid diet for the health of his newly cauterized stomach, he actually doesn't like the way the bones stick out in his wrists or how Chengle complains that his bones dig into him when he hugs him. At least it's not *too* serious; if he had continued eating at his normal pace without Chengle's arrival, he supposes his body would have been *much worse*.

He forces himself to finish his bowl, counting the days. He's been told that exactly seven days after his discharge, he can slowly start *trying* soft solids. God, he'd give his left hand away for

even a stupid vegetable puree or soft rice. He'd *kill* for something he could bite right now. He still has two full days left, and he's slowly going crazy. *He dreams* of eating.

They eat in quiet silence. Chengle helps him carry the dishes to the sink, and Shen Yuan reminds himself to wash them later—he'll only do that after his next dose of medicine, because honestly, his leg is making it very difficult for him to stand for long. He allows himself to be dragged with Chengle to the sofa, where they play with his Legos for a bit before Shen Yuan decides they can't ignore the elephant in the room any longer.

“Chengle, darling, come here for a moment,” he patted his side. Chengle obeyed quickly and without question, and only when the child snuggled into his arms did Shen Yuan begin, “Your mother wrote me a letter.”

Shen Yuan has never been good at having emotional conversations. When his parents or siblings started saying the slightest thing that implied emotions, his immediate response was to run away, hide, or simply ignore them. He's created a block in his own head to avoid getting overwhelmed whenever anyone around him gets even the slightest bit sentimental, especially in *hospital situations*. However, despite this, talking about emotions with Chengle is *easy*: life for him has been unfair, difficult, and sad, and of all the emotions that exist, Shen Yuan doesn't want that sweet little boy to be left alone with those.

So he tells him about his mother's letter. He rocks him and kisses his forehead, and when the boy reacts by crying softly and hugging him, Shen Yuan hugs him even tighter.

“I know that even though it hurts, you love your mom very much,” Shen Yuan says, as gently as he can. “And she loves you *very much*. She understands if you feel really sad and angry now, but she will never stop loving you with all her heart. Having a baby doesn’t mean she loves you any less; it just means her heart is bigger now, and she has more love to give.”

Luo Chengle continues to sob. He cries a little more in his arms, and when his crying subsides, with soft hiccups, Chengle nods.

“It hurt when she said about the baby,” he says, soft and small. “Mom and I played a lot. All the time. We left the palace and explored many beautiful places. Gardens! And forest! And pretty places! Sometimes even Lingling and An-ge and Shao-mei came! And everything *was* beautiful. Even though I trained and the older siblings were mean, I had *Mom*” he sobs, hiccuping. “Then Mom went on a mission and came back very sick, even much, much sicker than Yuan-ge” and Luo Chengle pouts. His whole little face is flushed, sad, and Shen Yuan cradles him in his arms, giving him space to vent his pain. “Lingling said Father Emperor cured her, but Mom got sick *again* later, and with a baby!” and Chengle sniffs, his lip trembling. “The baby made her *very* sick when grows onto her belly, and afterward, baby made her very sad. And even though the baby hurt her so much, Mom replaced me with the baby. It’s not *fair*.”

Shen Yuan sighs deeply. He brushes the boy's hair between his fingers, gently cooing to him.

“Sweetheart,” he whispers, as softly as he can. He caresses Chengle’s soft cheek, and he rests his face in his hand, looking up at him with his pout trembling. “I understand if you feel like your mom replaced you. It was very hard for you. But I promise she loves you just as much.

Only now you have a little sister whom she loves too. And if you ever want to see your Mom again, you know you can, right?" Chengle's pout trembles more. Shen Yuan forces himself to remain calm. "Whenever you want, only if you want. Little by little. Your mom is very, very sad, but she will get better. And everything might not be the same as before, but it will get better. It doesn't have to be the same as before to be good, okay, baby?"

Luo Chengle sips a little, nodding. Shen Yuan wipes his little face. Then he accompanies him to the bathroom, helping him wash his face thoroughly with cold water, and with a shaky effort of his arms, he carries him to the kitchen to give him water and candies. His sweet little boy hiccups a little, and it takes more than a movie to return him to a better mood.

Yet even as he plays, he seems just a little sad. It clearly doesn't help that before nightfall Luo Binghe returns. And when he does, once again wearing robes and boots, Luo Chengle gets up from where he's playing with an angry snort and runs off into the bedroom.

Luo Binghe looks at the place where he left, his brows furrowed. Shen Yuan is so used to seeing him upset that he has trouble understanding the confusion in his eyes.

"He had a bad day," he explains, sighing. He stands up, swaying only a little. "We talked about his mother, and he got into a… sensitive mood."

"He's angry with me," Luo Binghe says a moment later. His voice is strangely flat, and Shen Yuan supposes that's better than him being indignant. He nods.

"He's jealous, too," Shen Yuan replies. "He's felt pushed out and rejected ever since Mingyan gave birth. He's a very sensitive boy. I guess now that we've talked a bit and his feelings have been stirred to the surface, he must be angry with you because, well," he gestures, "you know. The baby you put in his mother. I don't know what exactly he knows about, you know," he makes a vague, allusive gesture, "but whatever he knows at his age, it's at least something he can associate with your guilt."

Luo Binghe lets out a sigh. He sounds far more exasperated than Shen Yuan would have expected. Shen Yuan rubs his forehead, a little annoyed. Not with Luo Binghe, and certainly not with Chengle, just with… well. He supposes it's one of those times when he just wants everything to be resolved without having to get involved, but at the same time, he's faced with the fact that if he doesn't do something to resolve it, clearly *nothing* will be resolved.

Luo Binghe looks at him. There's something tense, strange in his gaze. Like every time he returns, Shen Yuan notices that he looks more tired. He supposes it must be exhausting, all that traveling through universes, and he *doesn't even* want to imagine how many wives he's been lie down around with to keep Xin Mo pleased so it behaves and takes him back and forth through those sinister portals.

"Take off your boots," Shen Yuan finally says. Luo Binghe looks down, seeming to suddenly notice that he's standing in his boots on Shen Yuan's floor with a grimace. "I separated two drawers from the bathroom cabinet. One holds your hair products and the other holds some pajamas and change of clothes so you can shower and change more comfortably and privately. I also bought bigger towels; you're too tall. The rest of your clothes are in my closet. I'll buy you one when I get more organized."

Luo Binghe doesn't say thanks, but Shen Yuan doesn't really expect it. He's halfway after Chengle when Luo Binghe actually stops him. Shen Yuan is prepared to have to fight and defend himself physically, so it takes him exactly a moment to realize that Luo Binghe isn't tugging at his arm as if to rip it off, but rather has his hand on his forearm, stopping him.

"*What*?" he snaps.

"You love him," Luo Binghe says finally. Shen Yuan raises an eyebrow, looking at him in confusion. "Chengle. You love him."

"Of course," Shen Yuan complains. Seriously, is it so difficult for the great Demon Emperor to understand what paternal love is? It seems so. "He is *my* son. I love him."

"But he isn't," Luo Binghe says. Shen Yuan is already raising his hand to slap him again when Luo Binghe adds quickly. "He's not your *blood*. He's not your blood son."

Shen Yuan stares at Luo Binghe's expression, his hand still raised, trying to decipher any clues and getting completely lost in the attempt as he slowly lowers his hand. He doesn't look *angry*, and that's already... something. Confused, maybe. As if he were the one who couldn't figure something out. As if Luo Binghe wasn't the irritatingly confused person in the room.

"You weren't your mother's blood son either," is all Shen Yuan says. Luo Binghe backs away from him as if Shen Yuan had just fucking electrocuted him, his eyes widening into something that's almost painful to watch. "And she loved you from the moment she held you in her arms to the moment she had to say goodbye. Of all people, Luo Binghe, I would have thought *you* would understand."

Luo Binghe doesn't stop him this time when he goes into the room. Luo Chengle is lying on the bed, surrounded by stuffed animals, hugging Dawang Tiger and looking at him with tearful eyes when Shen Yuan enters the door.

Chengle doesn't say anything. Shen Yuan curls up beside him, and the boy quickly climbs onto him, hugging him very tightly. Shen Yuan is sure his ribs will be sore later, but what the heck. He's his sweet little boy, and a little pain compared to his happiness is really nothing.

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It's a little later when Shen Yuan gets out of bed, ready to take charge of heating up dinner. Luo Chengle has fallen asleep, easily cuddling Dawang Tiger in his sleep when the plush toy feels more comfortable than Shen Yuan's bony body.

His body feels stiff, and it's a little more difficult to move than he'd expected. The pain isn't unbearable, but it's *something*. It hasn't stopped snowing outside all day, and the frigid humidity makes even his bones ache far more than they should for someone who, despite all his great pain, has never broken a bone. The city lights are pompous flashes through the fogged-up glass.

Shen Yuan honestly has no idea what he's expecting when he steps into the quiet living room, but seeing Luo Binghe sitting on the sofa, fast asleep, is... well. Honestly, something he

hadn't really imagined.

He's not too sure he wants to assume he's faking – in reality, Luo Binghe looks exaggeratedly exhausted: the shadows under his eyes are things almost resembling his own, deep grayish marks sinking into his face. Besides, if Luo Binghe had wanted to play asleep to look vulnerable or some shit, he probably would have chosen something other than just letting his head fall to the side, mouth half-open, chest rising and falling deeply.

He's still wearing those robes, but he's taken off his boots. Shen Yuan bites the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing when he notices that he is, indeed, wearing different-colored socks. What a damn gap moe. He's going to beat him with his cane when he wakes up.

Shen Yuan tries hard to be as stealthy as possible. He returns to the room and comes out with a soft blanket, which he simply places over him, taking extreme care not to disturb his rest. Luo Binghe *really* does seem to be asleep, Shen Yuan believes, because he doesn't consider that in any other situation he would have allowed him to get so close without reacting in any way.

It's... strange to see him. His face is relaxed, even the constant wrinkle between his eyebrows is gone. He looks much... younger than Shen Yuan would assume for the shadow of a Demon Emperor with all the past Shen Yuan knows so well, his countenance like a jade statue with no chaotic emotions running through it, not... so many worries.

Shen Yuan walks away with his cane toward the kitchen. Well, it doesn't really matter. He supposes even Demon Emperor Lords have a bad day and simply end up too exhausted to even change. Besides, the sofa is quite comfortable and encourages a nice nap. Shen Yuan isn't going to blame him for that, either, given the number of times he's fallen asleep there between a blanket and a pillow, watching some silly anime or some ridiculously low-quality movie.

He rummages through the food containers. He heats up some of his clear soup in a small pot while he follows Ayi's instructions to heat up food for the two Heavenly Demons in his apartment. While he's at it, he suddenly finds himself chuckling. Wow. Is this really his life now, really? Heating up food for a kid and his absent tired father like a 1950s housewife? Hell, even his own mother used to let his father do most of the cooking.

He laughs a little at himself as he puts the dishes on a tray to take to the room and eat there with Chengle. What a huge idiot. He puts Luo Binghe's plate on the coffee table, covering it with another plate to keep it from getting cold too quickly. His legs are really burning as he struggles to walk with the tray and without his cane to carry the food to the room, but the last thing he wants is to wake up the clearly very exhausted Luo Binghe. Maybe later he and Chengle can watch a movie on the computer, and maybe he can read him some of the bedtime stories Yue-ge bought for the boy.

It's not a bad plan. Shen Yuan figures that, despite all the difficulties and overwhelming circumstances around him, well... he was right when he told his mother he had everything under control. One way or another, he'll make it work for Chengle. His sweet boy deserves as much happiness as Shen Yuan can give him, and even more, even if Shen Yuan has to traverse the confines of the absolute universe to find that happiness and deliver it to him.

Chapter End Notes

SY: Well, I'm FINALLY not Shizun
SY: I don't understand why this doesn't feel like a triumph at all

WHAT MANGA IS BINGGE READING? ONLY GOD AND I, AND SOME FUTURE CHAPTER WHERE I RETURN TO HIM READING MANGA, WILL KNOW
Someone MIGHT have already realized that—in the words of a friend wink-wink—he called for the wrong person. Obviously, that will have consequences :P

YES, MINGYAN WILL HAVE THERAPY!!! There are also instructions for Hualing on how to care for and help her wife, and more magic paints of baby Chengle for moms in roommate situation (as Shen Yuan would say)
Someone commented something like "Mingyan, my lesbian girl, what are you still doing papapa with your husband?" and that made me LAUGH SO MUCH that I literally had to explain. Yes, our Mingyan was wifeplotted and needed a survival aid that only a Heavenly Demon could help with

Also, something like:
LBG: This is the first time Mingyan has been affected by these kinds of circumstances, unlike my other wives. How strange that she's never needed my help before
SHL, who has been helping her every time she's wifeplotted, only now Mingyan definitely needed the Heavenly Pillar: Ah, yes, ahahaha, first time for her, yes of course my husband

Today's hits to Bingge was more moral than physical!!! :D Ah, he's having his circumstances that... we'll get to later. Anyone want to guess? ;3

As a bonus!!! Shen Yuan is clearly depressed here. I mean, he's internalizing the fact that he's "not" so much that I'm actually afraid you might think that if you have similar thoughts (clearly depressive, but refusing to acknowledge that they are and associating them with boredom or tiredness) you shouldn't seek help. I know it's not available to everyone, but a psychological checkup should be like a follow-up visit to the dentist, not only to check if there's a "problem", but to make sure everything is okay and in order :) Never forget the importance of asking for help, of recognizing the validity of your feelings and emotions, and that no matter the circumstances you're in, all the emotions you feel are valid and worthy of being treated as important *hug*

I EXTENDED A LOT WITH THIS NOTE, I'M SO SORRY, I'M VERY EMOTIONAL TODAY, OK???? NOTHING SERIOUS, DON'T WORRY. MY HORMONES. THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING!!! REALLY Joining me in this is like, wow, you're really here every day, thank you so much for so much!!!! I hope you enjoyed the chapter, and you know what!!! kudo-comment-interaction, sharing this together is WONDERFUL and the best experience I've had all year!!!
Thanks again and see you soon! :P

Chapter 14: Seventh day out, in the morning

Chapter Notes

> I'M ALMOST NOT FINISHED WRITING THIS CHAPTER. I REALLY ENJOYED IT AND DIDN'T KNOW WHERE TO END IT, SO I DECIDED TO SPLIT IT INTO TWO LOL SO TECHNICALLY TOMORROW'S CHAPTER IS ALMOST FINISHED TOO HEHEHEHE I was getting too long for the average reading word range for these chapters, but oh well. I don't regret anything :P
>
> Chapter warnings: internalized ableism, mentions/discussion of meds dependency issues
>
> Enjoy the chapter! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Shen Yuan simply allowed Luo Binghe to stay, for Chengle's happiness and because he basically had no way to kick him out of his house, he *didn't expect* that to be an open invitation for more demons to invade his apartment.

His muscles are straining at the edges today, more from the weather and the typical stiffness from sleeping in a bad position than from it being a typically bad day. There's a thick dampness from yesterday's snowfall, and apparently, it's been snowing heavily all night as well. From his fogged-up bedroom window, all Shen Yuan can see is the city covered in a blanket of white, barely illuminated by the light of dawn. He leaves his room, leaning on his cane, ready to carry some fresh water with which to take his medication and go back to sleep, and fucking gasps.

There's a demon standing in his living room—because even if he looks *close* to human, *there's no way* that person with a chiseled face is a mere human cosplayer sneaking into his apartment—staring at him with intense, black eyes and skin so pale it's clearly unreal. He's at least a head taller than Luo Binghe, with his blue robes covered in clinking silver jewels and at least half his chest exposed. Shen Yuan takes a deep breath and grips his cane like a sword.

"*LUO BINGHE!"*

"*Yuan-ge,*" and Luo Binghe, the fucking asshole, is suddenly peeking out from behind him as if he's always been right behind him. His voice and his breathing tickle the back of his neck. "Good morning."

Shen Yuan spins his cane before him; Luo Binghe is faster, dodging the blow with a smile tugging at the edges of his face. There's a strangely mocking glint in his eyes. He clearly looks much more rested, and a single glance at the coffee table shows that he has, indeed, also eaten all the food Shen Yuan left for him. Even if it didn't wake him or dare to, Luo Binghe certainly didn't disdain nourishment.

“So you just learned how to be polite?” Shen Yuan complains, because it’s too early, his muscles are creaking, he hasn’t even washed his face, and all he wants to do is push his medication down his throat with a glass of water and go back to sleep. It’s too early to be in a good mood. “Who you brought to my-…?”

“MOBEI-BOFU!!”

Shen Yuan doesn't even see the boy flash past him, nearly knocking him off balance. He stumbles, and only Luo Binghe's firm hand on his elbow keeps him from falling flat on his face, unable to balance properly with his cane, which he's using more as a defensive weapon than a support.

Luo Chengle runs, in his Totoro pajamas and his little feet in different-colored socks, straight to throw himself at the demon in the middle of the room. Shen Yuan allows himself to breathe a sigh of relief when Mobei Jun, instead of grabbing him by the scruff of the neck and throwing him away or swatting him away like a typical PIDW demon would do, simply lets the boy climb with his arms and legs wrapped koala-like around his leg.

“Little Prince,” Mobei Jun says. His icy voice is even warmer than Luo Binghe’s damned voice when he called his own son that first time, and Shen Yuan whacks him in the shin with his cane to make him let go, suddenly annoyed even by his presence. Luo Binghe lets him go with a click of his tongue. “It’s been a while. You’ve missed training.”

“I’m never training again!” the boy shrieks. He doesn’t let go of Mobei Jun for a second. “Never, never again! I live with Yuan-ge now! Yuan-ge is my favorite person in the world, and he won’t let anyone hit me!”

Mobei Jun reaches out and, with heartbreaking gentleness, brings the tip of his knuckles down on the boy's head. It doesn't even hurt—clearly, the tension in his muscles isn't even enough to cause the boy any pain—and yet, Shen Yuan is already gripping his cane so tightly that his shoulder aches.

“I hit you,” Mobei Jun says, indifferently. “You’ve become weak. You’ll have to train.”

The child bursts out laughing. He’s still laughing when Mobei Jun leans down, pulling him by the ankle, leaving him dangling upside down. Chengle squirms, wanting to struggle with Mobei Jun’s hand to make him let go, and Shen Yuan feels like he needs to sit down or he’s going to faint. The rational side of *Chengle is a Heavenly Demon, at least fourth-grade, raised with demons, he can’t be broken, he’s not going to get his head smashed by roughhousing,* definitely not winning against wanting to tear him from the grasp of the massive demon Mobei Jun, wrap his baby in a blanket, and hide him from the two potentially dangerous demons in the house.

“Chengle?” he calls, once he’s managed to control his voice. He takes a step that feels firmer than he thought he could. “When did you wake up, honey?”

“Yuan-ge! Yuan-ge!” and Luo Chengle jerks back in Mobei Jun’s grasp, still upside down, grinning broadly. His disheveled hair is a cascade of tangled curls, having escaped its braid sometime during the night. “Yuan-ge got out of bed and it was cold! And I heard Yuan-ge

scolding Father Emperor! I wanted to see if Yuan-ge would hit him again! Yuan-ge, this is Mobei-bofu! Mobei-bofu takes care of me when my siblings are mean! He makes ice animals, and, and, black snow that looks blue when it's sunny, and he throws snowballs at the siblings when they make me hurt too much! Yuan-ge, Yuan-ge, Mobei-bofu can make ice castles, just like Elsa!!"

Mobei Jun's face is expressionless as the boy squeals, chatters, and thrashes with far too much energy for his usual lazy morning self. Abruptly, Mobei Jun lets go of the boy's ankle, dropping him from his full height, and Shen Yuan feels his heart stop. Luo Chengle doesn't fall headfirst to the ground because Mobei Jun catches him and eases him back onto his feet with the ease of a split second as Shen Yuan tries to swallow his heart back into his body.

"*Great,*" he says hollowly. He forces a smile as Luo Chengle runs over, hugging him. "It's… an honor to meet you, Lord Mobei. I'm glad to know *someone* cares for my child."

Mobei Jun makes a sound of acknowledgment and inclines his head just a little in his direction. He doesn't reply, and Shen Yuan isn't entirely sure he expects anything in return.

"Good morning, Yuan-ge," Chengle says, his chin resting against his stomach, and his big, bright eyes looking up at him as he hugs him tightly. "It's snowing outside! Can we have congee for breakfast? And dumplings?"

Shen Yuan exhales. He looks at everyone present and sighs.

"I guess that's fine," he agrees. Luo Chengle breaks free from his embrace, hopping like a sweet bunny with excitement. He'll finish his supply of congee and dumplings in one meal to feed two Heavenly Demons and one Ice Demon, and he might have to call kitchen-Ayi first, but Luo Chengle looks so happy that how could Shen Yuan do anything else? "But first, baby. Go wash up and brush your teeth. And I want to see you in at least a sweater and wool socks when you get back. It's so cold today."

"Yes, Yuan-ge!" Luo Chengle leaps toward him, hugging him devastatingly. Shen Yuan clutches his cane with the most painful pull to keep from falling, but Luo Chengle smiles broadly and runs toward the bathroom.

Only when Chengle has left does Shen Yuan allow himself to slump against the wall, panting. He clutches his leg with a trembling hand, teeth clenched to keep from crying out.

"Yuan-ge?" and Luo Binghe, the bastard who brings surprise demons to his apartment, approaches. There's no malice or mockery on his face, and Shen Yuan isn't too sure he likes the way he says his name.

Shen Yuan shakes his head.

"I'm fine," he says as firmly as he can muster in his voice. It takes strength and energy to hold onto his cane; the burning sensation creeps from his elbow to his shoulder and back, and shit, Shen Yuan grimaces. This is going to be a *very bad day*. "Lord Mobei, pardon the indiscretion and the inappropriate question. Do you prefer your food cold or hot?"

Mobei Jun looks at him as if he doesn't understand why Shen Yuan is asking him something. Finally, he answers with a simple: "Cold."

And even so, he is less hostile than Luo Binghe has been to Chengle. Shen Yuan sulks.

“I thank Lord Mobei for his reply. I’ll take care of breakfast,” he said, gesturing toward the sofa. “Luo Binghe can entertain your guest. Excuse me.”

Clenching his jaw, Shen Yuan slinks into the kitchen. He fills his glass with water, and only then, with a burning sensation so severe he has to drop it to the floor and nearly bang his head on the counter behind him, does he realize he'd gone to such lengths to get to the kitchen only to leave his meds on the nightstand. He'd had no intention of doing anything other than pouring water for him, taking his medicine, and returning to bed. Now, in reality, there's a lump of tears in his throat because he has breakfast to take care of, a sleep-deprived, hyperactive kid to feed and put back to sleep, and he's not sure he can even *move*.

He takes a deep breath, clutching his cane. How ridiculous. He must be able to stand. He *must*-

“Yuan-ge?”

Honestly, if Shen Yuan were given a damn coin every time Luo Binghe found him sprawled on the kitchen floor dying of pain…

Luo Binghe advances toward him. Shen Yuan hisses in pain as he feels the grip of Binghe's hands helping him up, and he averts his face, clenching his jaw to avoid seeing him. How pathetic of him. It's one thing, he's sure, to have to endure that in the middle of the night. Now, honestly, there's pretty pale lighting through the windows even though it's not even seven in the morning. Shen Yuan can see the way the fabric of Binghe's sweater twitches and shifts with each of his breaths, and his eyes and throat burn.

“I told you I was *fine*,” is all he can hiss, embarrassed. The ridiculous humiliation eats away at him. Pathetic, *pathetic*. “Go with Mobei Jun. I hope bringing guests into the apartment isn't a habit, Luo Binghe. I don't want…”

“I order him to wait. He will obey me,” Luo Binghe says firmly, interrupting him. Shen Yuan bites his tongue to keep from blurting out some kind of hostile comment. It’s not that Luo Binghe particularly deserves them now than on other occasions, it’s just… Shen Yuan is in a bad mood and too sore. And too tired. “This Lord heard Yuan-ge fall.”

“I *didn’t fall*,” he complains, though he’s sure he doesn’t think he could stand even with his cane if he takes even a step. “It’s not a good day, Luo Binghe.”

“Is this Yuan-ge’s illness? Is it progressing?” he asks. Shen Yuan is about to argue even more sharply when Luo Binghe abruptly lifts him up and sits him on the kitchen counter. Shen Yuan has done this countless times with Chengle, but there lies a stark difference: Chengle is a *child*, and Shen Yuan is a full-fledged adult! Damn! “Will Yuan-ge needs that hospital again?”

Shen Yuan exhales shakily.

“No,” he says. He focuses on the lines in Chengle’s drawing stuck on the kitchen wall, a Totoro with a colorful umbrella. “My body is weak from a different illness than the one that put me in the hospital. There are good days when I don’t need the cane, and bad days when I can barely move without it. The pain is… so much,” he forces himself to say. He supposes it’s the kind of thing that, in a way, should be shared when he cohabits with someone. Isn’t it? So that it won’t be a damn embarrassing shock for Luo Binghe to see him sprawled like a bug on the floor. It’s not something that’s happened much in the past—on bad days, Shen Yuan didn’t even usually get up to eat and only got out of bed to go to the bathroom, and even lying down sometimes made his body ache. “And I can’t get rid of the pain. My brother took away my medicaments for that.”

Luo Binghe is silent for a moment. On one hand, Shen Yuan wants to turn his face and look at him. To try to guess what's going on in his head that's keeping him silent. On the other hand, he's not sure he can bear to see the pity on the face of, *of all people*, Luo Binghe.

“Why?” Luo Binghe asks finally. His voice is strange. It’s not an accusatory kind of interrogative tone, but something more subtle. If Shen Yuan didn’t know better, he’d say he was even curious, as if something mundane like this could intrigue the oh great Demon Emperor. “Is Yuan-ge’s brother someone seeking to torture him?”

“No,” Shen Yuan says quickly. He sighs, because he’s sure anyone who knew Jiu-ge would say *exactly* the opposite, but Jiu-ge was someone difficult to understand. Shen Yuan even felt like he didn’t fully understand him at times. “He’s… worrying. In his own way. Taking too much medication would damage my stomach, even more. Besides, he thinks I’m dependent on it.”

He rolls his eyes, snorting. He still manages to avoid looking at Luo Binghe's face.

“Why?” he asks again. Shen Yuan sighs deeply.

“I don’t like pain,” he admits. The truth is, who likes suffering all the time? Even if Shen Yuan is so used to it that he might be indifferent to the same pain that would make others cry, just because he’s used to it *doesn’t mean* he likes it. “When I push myself hard, my muscles feel it and it hurts. And when I’m in a lot of pain, I take medicine to avoid feeling it. Then I can do things the pain wouldn’t let me do. Sometimes I can’t even sleep because of the pain,” he admits, shrugging. That small movement also burns on his shoulder from unbalancing himself with his cane earlier. “My brother thinks I have a dependency on medicine that takes aways the pain. He’s *always* thinks that.”

He bites the inside of his cheek. Actually, Jiu-ge had *always* insisted that Shen Yuan had problems, but wasn't Jiu-ge the one who started smoking before he was twenty? Wasn't Jiu-ge the one who had to be dragged out of shady bars by Yue Qi before the press caught him there when he was young? Shen Yuan had always thinks that, by trying to evade his own real problems with nicotine addiction, Shen Jiu had always wanted to push everyone into believing that it was *Shen Yuan* who had a problem.

That… that had led them to fight a lot in the past.

Luo Binghe lets out a sound of acknowledgment. Shen Yuan is willing to say anything that will break the tension in the air, anything that doesn't sound like continuing to gasp in pain and anguish at *fucking Luo Binghe*, when the man closes the distance, cornering him completely on the counter. Both of his hands are large, fingers long and slender, white over his pajama pants. Shen Yuan doesn't even have a logical or sane moment to grasp the absolutely outrageous and ridiculous position they're in with Luo Binghe between his legs before Luo Binghe slides his hands down his thighs, the pressure so painful it makes him choke.

"*Luo B-…"*

Halfway through his threat, he falters as warmth invades his muscles. He barely acknowledges the sound of absolutely relief that rises in his throat. The warmth pushes through his most aching muscles, and even further, up his back to his shoulder blades, sliding down his shoulders. Shen Yuan practically drops onto him like a rag doll, and one of Luo Binghe's hands does the ridiculous thing of scooting up his hip, along his spine, to the center of his back, molding him until Shen Yuan can rest his forehead on his shoulder, unable to do anything but feel the utter relief and take deep breaths, as if it were never enough.

The qi is stronger than last time, but never as erratic as Chengle's. It isn't painful, though it completely stuns all of his senses for more than an instant. It pushes forward with a voracity that would seem hostile if it didn't possess such gentleness. It presses on his tense tendons, on every stiff muscle, on the straining pressure on his shoulder, back, neck. It eases an ache in his wrist from leaning on the cane he'd grown accustomed to, and it even drags over the base of his scalp, undoing the burning of the horrible stress headache.

His eyelids feel heavy, his body soft, too light. He barely believes he can move his neck to move away. A thought that is too hysterical gives Shen Yuan the mental image that, if Jiu-ge were to see him now, *he* would accuse him of being some kind of addict.

It's not like it's some drug. *It could* be. The relief and the lack of pain is probably the most wonderful thing Shen Yuan has ever felt in his entire life. Not just living with low-level pain, but *not feeling pain at all.* It's almost delirious. He's sitting and it doesn't hurt, his neck is bent and not tugged annoyingly by every single muscle. It's the most wonderful thing.

And it is then, just a moment of relief later–

"No," Shen Yuan heard Mobei Jun's deep voice, too close to the kitchen door. "The Little Prince cannot come in."

"But there's Yuan-ge!" Shen Yuan hears the boy complain. "I want to show him that I brushed my teeth! White teeth! Look!"

Even without seeing him, Shen Yuan can imagine the boy flashing that toothpaste-commercial grin to show Mobei Jun how white and clean his teeth are. Shen Yuan's head is still too foggy, and though he wants to crawl away from the tide holding him painlessly, Luo Binghe's hand is still on his back, qi moving through him with such voracity that it makes him dizzy and almost unable to think.

“Very white,” Mobei Jun hears reply. “But the Little Prince can’t come in. Your human and Junshang are… making breakfast.”

“But I can help!” And he can almost, almost see Chengle’s pout. Not that he can see more than Luo Binghe’s shoulder, from where he stands, struggling to breathe at a normal pace, trying to regain control of his body. The relief is almost numbing. “I can, I can!”

“Mn,” and for a moment, Shen Yuan can feel his pulse race even through his daze. His movements are spontaneous, abrupt, wanting to get away. Fuck, *fuck.* What the hell is Chengle going to think if he sees that? He’s *not* going to be happy. They’re supposed to be a united front against Luo Binghe! “You can’t. Your human is hitting Junshang.”

“What?! Mobei-bofu!! I don’t hear any, I want to see, I want to see!”

Shen Yuan hears another sound, and then Chengle's loud laughter. Firm, seemingly resoundingly loud footsteps move away from the door, and Shen Yuan feels himself exhaling as Chengle's laughter grows more distant. Damn.

Luo Binghe seems to decide he's been turning Shen Yuan into a stunned rag doll for too long now, because little by little, the warmth drains from his body. He leaves no residual pain behind, only a slight feeling of daze, and his head feels unusually fuzzy. It takes at least a full minute for him to begin to feel the utter, humiliating shame and start struggling to get out of Luo Binghe's grasp. *What the fuck, what the fuck,* his head is racing in all directions, choking, twitching. What the hell just *happened*?

“Is Yuan-ge feeling better now?” Luo Binghe asks. Shen Yuan opens his mouth, ready to start yelling at him, and then closes it, because he actually *does* feel much better. He still feels dizzy, and honestly, a little too groggy for comfort, but not enough that he can’t nod.

“I am,” he says reluctantly. And even more so, he murmurs a low “Thank you.”

It's not that it hurts his pride. Of course, it *hurts* his pride a little to have to thank Luo Binghe for something that might make his narcissistic ego grow even more, but it's true that his mother has raised a well-behaved boy (any poor decisions Shen Yuan may have made regarding his upbringing and internet manners have nothing to do with his mother), and the correct thing he can do is express his gratitude.

Even more so when he has a full dose of Heavenly Demon morphine in his veins. Hell. Jiu-ge could literally find *so many* loopholes as to how that's not going to help him psychologically that Shen Yuan feels irritated just thinking about him, and a little guilty, though he can't quite put his finger on why.

Luo Binghe, however, doesn't move. Shen Yuan may not feel any pain now, but that doesn't mean that even as he slowly returns to his own mind, he can't feel the sordid humiliation coming to the forefront. This position they're in... Honestly, it's so *unseemly*! If Shen Yuan were a woman, there would be too many misunderstandings on the table! LITERALLY ON THE TABLE! *Luo Binghe!!*

“Of course,” Luo Binghe says a moment later. Shen Yuan dares to look at him, only to find that *his* face is now turned to one side, his expression evasive as he takes a single step back, then two. Shen Yuan staggers slightly to step down from the kitchen counter, and when he reaches out to bend down and pick up his cane, Luo Binghe is already placing it there. And then: “Yuan-ge should rest. This Lord can do breakfast.”

“You don’t know how to use a microwave,” is the first thing Shen Yuan says. He’s surprised when he takes a few steps and feels like he’s just been gifted new muscles. It’s even better than a good day. “Besides, I can’t just eat whatsoever. And this stove works differently than…”

“I know. I’ve been watching,” Luo Binghe says. He doesn’t say it in a boastful or arrogant way. Shen Yuan watches him, trying to understand *what*’s on his mind, but Luo Binghe still doesn’t look at all in his direction. “Yuan-ge doesn’t have to worry. He took care of this Lord, so allow this Lord to take care of you now. Yuan-ge looks like he could use a little more rest.”

Shen Yuan presses his mouth into a thin line. He *can't* deny that. His new routine may involve waking up before breakfast time, but he's not sure it's medically recommended. Even if he hates thinking about it, it makes sense that he's more fatigued and exhausted: after all, he just got out of the hospital. His body is on just the right, exact, even low dose of all his meds. It makes perfect sense that he's struggling to get adequate sleep.

“Fine,” he agrees, sighing. “Thank you, Binghe.”

Luo Binghe tilts his head at him. It's the first time since he climbed down from the kitchen counter that he's been able to see his expression, and for once, he's not irritated to see a small smile spread across his face. It's almost pleasant, even if it doesn't seem to quite light up his face.

Shen Yuan takes his glass of water and leaves the kitchen.

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Mobei Jun and Luo Chengle are definitely playing in a way that makes his heart leap to his throat just from a glance. Mobei Jun has the boy upside down by his ankles, his tummy exposed through his pajamas, and the boy is squealing, trying to get free.

“Yuan-ge, Yuan-ge!” the boy shrieks, his arms flailing in all directions, writhing. “He caught me! He’s a monster! He’s going to eat me!”

“I don’t eat pups,” Mobei Jun says, his eyebrow twitching. Chengle sticks his tongue out at him.

“Now you are! You’re a monster who caught me and wants to eat me, and Yuan-ge is coming to save me!” He continues to writhe. Mobei Jun seems to analyze the situation, shrugs, and advance over, clearly ready to—*REALLY!?*—try to bite Chengle’s leg, as the child continues to squirm and scream.

Shen Yuan puts aside his cane, abandons his glass on a shelf on the wall and runs towards him.

“No monsters that eat children,” he warns. Mobei Jun exhales with what Shen Yuan recognizes as relief, and only manages to make him laugh. Well, Shen Yuan supposes Airplane will have some competition now with who Chengle’s favorite uncle-playmate will be. Mobei Jun seems very committed to the cause. “This child is mine, and it’s not for eating.”

Mobei Jun lets go of one of his hands, letting the boy hang from his ankle and holding him out to Shen Yuan like a package. Shen Yuan sighs, rolling his eyes as he tries, with great effort considering he doesn't want to accidentally drop the sweet, wild boy, to hug and take Chengle up in his arms.

Luo Chengle is a good boy and cooperates. Once he gets around his neck, he simply clings to him like a big koala, and Shen Yuan spins around with the boy in his arms, making him laugh while tickling him.

“What a cute little boy! Look at that red face,” he says. And then, with a wide grin: “Well, too bad I'm the monster here. I'm going to eat this cute, tasty little boy.”

Chengle lets out a roar of laughter as Shen Yuan playfully tries to nibble at his cheek. He starts yelling for Mobei-bofu to rescue him, who looks to Shen Yuan for some kind of instruction. Shen Yuan nods, and Shen Yuan just prays that his neighbors won't complain too much when Mobei Jun tugs on the boy a little to free him from his grasp, and Chengle holds on tighter to Shen Yuan, laughing loudly and still squealing.

Shen Yuan can't stop himself. He can't stop him. It's the loudest he's heard Chengle laugh in *days*, and the tender sound of his laugh is almost addictive.

“Yuan-ge is eating me! *Noooo*!” Chengle continues to laugh as he ends up being held by Mobei Jun again, this time in a less chaotic way for Shen Yuan’s heart, with the great demon holding him more firmly from under his arms. “Yuan-ge, you can’t eat me! If Yuan-ge eat me we can’t play together again!”

“Mmn,” Shen Yuan pretends to think about it. He knows the wide smile on his face is impossible to erase, so his thoughtful expression actually isn’t that great. “Well, that’s true. What would I do without my baby? I won’t eat you *just* if we get some more sleep. It’s still too early,” he insists.

Luo Chengle pouts a bit, but also yawns, so Shen Yuan figures he's halfway there.

It's just a little hard to convince him. With a few tickles, Mobei Jun tossing him in the air and catching him two-three times (Shen Yuan's heart is almost in his throat and on the verge of praying each time the boy gets closer to the ceiling), Luo Chengle yawns enough times that only the promise of eating lots of colorful cereal after breakfast makes him want to stop playing.

“Mobei-bofu is staying to play later?” the boy asks, yawning on Shen Yuan’s shoulder. “I like Mobei-bofu. He plays with me and An-ge all the time. And he makes ice swans for Shao-mei. Shao-mei chases them around and scares them, though. My Meimei is scary.”

Shen Yuan raises his eyebrows at Mobei Jun. Mobei Jun, who has sat down on the sofa, nods.

“Junshang asked me to investigate something in this world,” Mobei Jun says simply. “I’ll stay today.”

“And tomorrow?” Luo Chengle asks. Shen Yuan rocks him as gently as he can, trying to lull him further.

“Not tomorrow,” Mobei Jun says. There’s no coldness in his voice, though. It’s a strange contrast to his expressionless face and stoic gaze, because when he speaks, he’s actually much warmer to the boy than Luo Binghe had been at first. “Saintess Sha will interrogate me about you.”

“Another day!” the boy whines. Shen Yuan pats his back, rocking him further. “Another day?” he asks now, with a yawn.

“I’ll try,” Mobei Jun replies.

Finally, Shen Yuan can leave with his glass of water and his baby. It's almost ridiculous to take his medicine now, and even more ridiculous that his hyperactive, sleepy child falls fast asleep at the mere touch of the bed. Shen Yuan laughs and coos a little, snuggling up to his side.

It's only when he's drifting off to sleep that he realizes he didn't pick up his cane from where he dropped it. That he didn't even need the support while he was playing so roughly with Chengle that on another occasion he probably would have ended up crying in pain. He laughs into his pillow, fascinated. He supposes he owes Luo Binghe a very big thank you after all.

Maybe he even deserves a Christmas present.

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Shen Yuan wakes up to a scent so exquisite in the air that his stomach is growling.

Judging by the light in the window, he's sure it's been at least two, maybe three hours. It's mid-morning, and when he stretches carefully, he notices there's no pain to worry about. Memories of the early morning come flooding back—Mobei Jun, Chengle playing rough, his collapse in the kitchen, Luo Binghe…

Oh. *Damn*.

Chengle isn't in bed beside him. Neither are his stuffed animals. He stays still, trying to listen—laughter, voices? Something? Chilling to the bone when all he hears is absolute silence.

Shen Yuan stands up so abruptly that he feels dizzy. He doesn't need his cane to rush to the door, forcing it open. He reaches the living room and nearly collapses with relief.

“Yuan-ge!” Over there, Luo Chengle has a wide smile, a more rested little face, and is surrounded by stuffed tigers. He’s wearing wool socks and a warm sweater. Mobei Jun sits on the floor beside him, letting the boy occupy the sofa and show him all his tigers in order. So far, there are eight of them, and Shen Yuan is sure there are *only* eight because Christmas hasn’t arrived yet and Chengle hasn’t had access to all the Shen family’s gifts. “Good morning. Again!”

Shen Yuan exhales in relief.

“Good morning again,” he says, smiling. He’s stupidly relieved that the boy is there; for a moment, he had truly believed that Luo Binghe had taken him with Mobei Jun’s help, and fear had almost overcome him. “You didn’t wake me.”

“Nu-uh,” Chengle shakes his head. “Yuan-ge seemed very tired. So, it’s okay for him to sleep,” he says in his sweet little voice, and Shen Yuan restrains himself from rushing to hug him tightly. “But I’m hungry. Father Emperor hasn’t finished cooking breakfast yet; he’s been there for a long time!! Is it Yuan-ge’s birthday?”

“Huh?” Shen Yuan tries to get his neurons to synapse. Then he shakes his head, understanding. “No, no. Your father… wanted to make breakfast,” he says, though the words sound strange in his mouth. He doesn’t quite know how to explain that Luo Binghe had a small lapse of fierce humanity and decided that Shen Yuan was too tired to attend to the guest Luo Binghe had brought, other than, of course, cooking for him and his own son. Oh, what a big surprise. “For you too.”

Chengle's eyes widen in shock. Shen Yuan feels a pain in his chest. Ah, his poor baby. He really shouldn't have been used to receiving good food from his father only on his birthday. Seriously, what kind of bad parenting was that?

Then Chengle's expression brightens. "Yuan-ge is the best!" he says and then starts bouncing in his seat. "Mobei-bofu, Yuan-ge made Father cook for me! And it's not my birthday! Yuan-ge is the best!"

Shen Yuan sighs, amused. Now that he realizes Chengle is there and that his son hasn't really been kidnapped, he lets him continue playing with all those tigers and Mobei Jun. He has no idea what they're playing with, but he seems less of a brute, so he's sure they can stay unsupervised for a while longer if they've been behaving civilly and peacefully without waking him up first.

With a little curiosity, Shen Yuan heads to the kitchen.

“Oh,” is all he says. Luo Binghe’s sweater sleeves are up to his elbows, his hair is in a high bun, and honestly, the *entire* kitchen is an absolute chaos. There are at least five different trays of dumplings, two pots bubbling on the stove, and the most exquisite scent in the air. Shen Yuan is sure there were dishes left to wash, but even that is neatly organized in the drainer. “Luo Binghe. Are you still cooking?”

“Yuan-ge always saves a lot of food,” he says matter-of-factly. He doesn’t turn to look at him, but there’s a strange anticipation in his movements. Shen Yuan sees the way he flattens the

dough against his hands, the way he uses just the right amount of filling. There's a batch of dumplings that seem to be on the stovetop, smelling exquisite. Even the simmering broth smells exceptionally good even for having only basic seasonings. "This Lord could no longer leave the responsibility of feeding his son solely to Yuan-ge. Feeding and providing for Chengle is this Lord's responsibility as well."

Shen Yuan examines it with curious eyes. Well, he supposes it makes *sense* now that he says it like that. Because it's clear there weren't that many raw things in his cupboards and refrigerator for cook, anyway—it's clear that at least half of the knives and clay pots the things are cooking in clearly don't belong to his kitchen. When he peers into the contents of the pots, the least appetizing-looking broth also looks like the most appetizing Shen Yuan has been able to eat lately, and it's clear enough that Luo Binghe couldn't have spilled any blood into it.

"That's… considerate. Thank you," he finds himself saying, with a resigned sigh. He can't deny it's a considerable effort on his part. "Chengle's already hungry. And he's excited to eat what you made."

The hand Luo Binghe is using to scoop the filling twitches. Shen Yuan almost feels like he said something wrong, because the way Luo Binghe is gripping the wooden spoon isn't too healthy for the spoon's integrity.

He doesn't break it, though. He sets it aside and silently closes the dumpling in his hand, which sways, tense, and thickens. A moment later, too long, he asks:

"What are his favorites?"

Shen Yuan blinks. Then, before he has any chance to speak, Luo Binghe turns away slightly. Several strands are escaping from his tied-back hair, and his eyes look oddly determined. Shen Yuan keeps noticing that the number of dumplings is… well. Enough to feed a small army. It's actually more than he's ever had in his refrigerator, and he's not exactly sure he actually has room for them all. Maybe he should send a frozen batch to Airplane or his sister. Or both.

"Pardon?"

"His favorite dumplings," Luo Binghe repeats. He seems reluctant to speak, though. It's as if every word is difficult for him. "Chengle's. He… Which ones are his favorites?"

"Oh," Shen Yuan understands. He licks his lips, thinking it over. "He likes them with pork. With a crispy bottom," he explains, as gently as he can. There's something about Luo Binghe's face that looks like he's in pain, and Shen Yuan finds it a little too difficult to look at him. "He doesn't like them with shrimp. He doesn't like shrimp that much."

Luo Binghe exhales slowly. He nods.

"I'll make the crispy-bottomed pork," he says a moment later, peering into the pan. "This Lord was cooking the beef first. This one thought…" and frowns a little. Then he shakes his

head. “No matter. There’s congee. And broth for Yuan-ge. I’ll separate the solids and puree them for when Yuan-ge can consume them. The dumplings will be ready in a moment.”

Shen Yuan nods. Luo Binghe turns his back on him, setting aside the dumpling he was filling on the tray. He begins to remove a few dumplings from a higher tray—one Shen Yuan assumes is filled with pork—and lines them up nearby. Shen Yuan stares at him, trying to understand the strange elegance of his movements, the fluid way he moves with both hands, doing things independently in a cuisine he barely knows but seems to have quickly adopted as his own.

He's only a little dizzy when he leaves the kitchen. He holds onto the edge of the door, shaking his head. He figures that after days and days of watching Luo Binghe be a pain in the ass, seeing him be reasonable is… well. Shocking, of course.

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

Just as Luo Binghe had said, breakfast wouldn't be long in coming. Shen Yuan had barely heard the beginning of the story of the Duck King that Chengle had begun to tell Mobei Jun when Luo Binghe began moving between the kitchen and the dining room, carrying trays, plates, and bowls. He never looked in their direction, and he never seemed to be doing anything with any less dignity than he would do his duties as Emperor.

When he finally finishes, he continues with the sleeves up to his elbows and approaches.

“Breakfast is ready,” he says, and looks at the coffee table, covered with stuffed tigers. He seems to struggle with himself before speaking. “Chengle must allow this Emperor to move his tigers. If he doesn’t allow it, this Lord has no problem and will eat in the kitchen.”

Shen Yuan looks in Chengle's direction. He's not surprised to meet the boy's gaze, his eyes as wide as saucers as if a unicorn were staring at him—in fact, Shen Yuan supposes Chengle would be less surprised to see a unicorn, since the *fucking* Airplane had actually included them in PIDW.

Chengle looks at him, his eyes wide as if searching for an answer from Shen Yuan, and then seems to make a decision. He turns to Luo Binghe and, clutching one of his tigers tightly to his chest, says: “Father Emperor cooked for Chengle. So… Father Emperor can eat with me… today. If… if Father Emperor wants.”

Luo Binghe swallows. Shen Yuan sees the way his Adam's apple rises and falls, the way his chest moves as he takes a deep breath, and another. Then he nods slowly.

“It would be an honor for this Lord to eat with Prince Chengle,” he says, so softly it’s almost a whisper.

When Shen Yuan looks in Chengle's direction, he finds his son's eyes watering, and a small smile beginning to form on his mouth. When Shen Yuan swallows the awkward lump in his throat, he's sure the grimace on his own face may also be the beginning of a smile.

It's nicer than he thought to see Luo Binghe try, he supposes. Shen Yuan has been thinking so much about how much Chengle needs his mother too that he actually forgot that, although Luo Chengle has him to love, care for, and protect, he also has a father whose love he yearned for as only a child could, and he needs him too.

He just hopes that the small change will only be the door to a bigger, positive change, and not to continue breaking his son's heart, because that is something that Shen Yuan will not be willing to tolerate for even a second.

Chapter End Notes

MBJ, seeing that LBG is going after the human: ...
MBJ, hearing suspicious noises where LBG and SY have locked themselves in the kitchen: ... oh. I owe Sha Hualing so much money

I'm a simp for Mobei Jun, and I don't think any of you can blame me. My favorite version of Mobei Jun (and the one I usually conceptualize in my fanfics when I write about him) is @Djuney9's this handsome demon has me ALMOST as crazy as Bingge *barks*

In my limited experience with children, they should get an adequate amount of sleep. Too little, and they'll be hyperactive. Too much, and they'll be very 'eepy. Is there any explanation for this? I have NO IDEA. I haven't done any research, just based on my personal experiences with toddlers and kiddos, so ¯_(ツ)_/¯

Anyway, Bingge took the oportunity in front of him... with immediate and unexpected results. He's having complicated emotions about all of it. I think Shen Yuan would too, if he weren't SO deep inside a DAMN, LOCKED, FUCKING CONCRETE CLOSET. YOU BOY, GET OUT OF THERE, YOU'RE DRIVING ME CRAZY *shakes him*
SY is like: "I'm not dependent on painkillers. Just so you know, I can live just fine without them :)" and then does the equivalent of getting high but in xianxia
WHAT ARE THE DEMON WITH THE CREEPY SWORD AND THE DEMON CAPABLE OF CREATING SHADOW PORTALS IN THE MODERN WORLD RESEARCHING FOR? WE'LL FIND OUT SOONER THAN YOU EXPECT because I'm impatient, and I know you guys are too /j

MORE BABY STEPS FOR LUO BINGHE. He's trying. Will he continue to suffer as part of his learning? Yes, of course. But he'll try in the process!!! He's doing something!!! He's doing the bare minimum!!! (the bar is in the abyss)

AAAA I REALLY HOPE YOU REALLY LIKED AND ENJOYED THE CHAPTER. OH, WELCOME TO THE JOURNEY TO THE NEW PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN READING AND COMMENTING!!! I've gotten to the point where I recognize many of your users LMAO you're now my best friends, you're obligated to join me in this until the end /j THANK YOU SO MUCH! REALLY!!! You know, kudo-interaction-

comment, I'm here to have fun with you and be your personalized entertainment clown :P Also, a HUGE thank you to everyone who's been worrying about me not getting burnout. WHEN I feel like it's too much (because it will happen), I'll take a week to update every other day (maybe next week? My self-care is a bit of shit sometimes, sorry) But anyway!! You make me feel loved and cared for. THANK YOU SO MUCH T_T
ANYWAY!!! SEE YOU SOON :D

Chapter 15: Seventh day out, in the afternoon

Chapter Notes

> All of you: Take breaks! Take care of your health and don't overexert yourself!! Be careful!!
> Me: And here I am again with another chapter :D
> HAHAHAHAHA I LOVE YOU, I REALLY DO. HEY, WHAT DO I MEAN I BEAT THE WORD COUNT OF THE FIRST HARRY POTTER BOOK? I'M IN SHOCK. WHAT THE HELL. THANK YOU. Thanks for joining me in this absolute madness. I love you so much
>
> Chapter warnings: more internalized ableism
>
> ENJOY THE CHAPTER :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Not being in pain, as always, puts Shen Yuan's outlook on life in a better mood. Not having Luo Binghe's behind, tension, and provocations right on his neck, too.

It is true that Mobei Jun has come to investigate something: shortly after breakfast and Mobei Jun finishes hearing the story of the Duck King (Shen Yuan was surprised not only that he remembered where they left off, but also that he was *genuinely interested* in knowing the ending), Luo Binghe forces –under threats that Shen Yuan would have been better off not knowing were things Luo Binghe could do– Mobei Jun to dress in modern clothes from his own wardrobe so as not to attract even more attention among mortals, and only when he no longer looks like he might catch winter pneumonia from being half-chested and is in a much worse mood, Luo Binghe takes them both through a portal in Xin Mo.

Where to? Neither of them explains. Somewhere in this world, Shen Yuan supposes, and although he's dying of curiosity, he has more important things to do. He'll probably find out when the time is right, after all; and if they happen to do something potentially dangerous, well. Two muscular men with long hair would easily be mentioned on the news. Shen Yuan just had to stay alert.

So he spends the rest of the day willingly with Chengle. They watch two Ghibli movies, read short fairytales, and Luo Chengle draws lots of ice tigers for his Mobei-bofu to take home. When Chengle gets bored enough and Shen Yuan decides he's had enough screen time for the day, he decides to rummage through his old books and takes out his illustrated edition of The Hobbit, curls up with Luo Chengle next to him, and begins reading aloud to him.

They're still in the early chapters when, finally, Luo Binghe and Mobei Jun return from their reconnaissance expedition… or whatever it is they've gone on, both of them with snow all

over their hair, their clothes clearly damp from where the snow has melted, and their faces pink from the wind. Shen Yuan marks the chapter where they left off and closes the book, allowing his child to run with pleasant little hops to stick close to his –now grumpy but never hostile, Shen Yuan learns– Mobei-bofu.

Then, reluctant enough that Shen Yuan has to hide his laughter behind his book, Chengle gives a small bow to Luo Binghe, murmuring: “Father Emperor. Welcome.”

And with that alone, he pulls Mobei Jun's hand to drag him to play, now with his Legos that he quickly puts on the coffee table, starting to laugh and saying that now he too can build wonderful things and showing him his little constructions.

Shen Yuan feels like a lazy cat as he stretches himself to stand up. It's *so* nice to be able to do it without pain anywhere that it alone makes him feel in a better mood, in favor of Luo Binghe for just that one day.

“Welcome,” he says, pointing to the shoe cabinet by the door, where several of Luo Binghe’s boots have been piling up. “I can understand Mobei Jun not taking off his shoes, but you do. Shoes off.”

“As Yuan-ge says,” Luo Binghe hums, who doesn’t seem as grumpy or moody as he usually does, going to kick them off. Shen Yuan sighs, grabbing a towel that he throws to Luo Binghe and moving towards the kitchen. Luo Binghe follows him while drying the melted snow on his hair, and Shen Yuan supposes it’s because Luo Binghe doesn’t really have much else to go with his small space in the living room fully invaded by Mobei Jun and Chengle with his Legos.

“I don’t think you ate anything outside,” Shen Yuan clicks his tongue as he takes another glass container of food out of the fridge. It’s Ayi’s this time, because in his experience, it’s best not to leave already cooked food in the fridge for too long. Food poisoning is pretty nasty, and he doesn’t want *another* hospitalization due to carelessness. “Are you hungry? Honestly, I don’t know if Mobei Jun would eat this without reheating it. I don’t think it would taste *bad*, but still, I feel like it would be rude of me.” Shen Yuan grimaces as soon as he realizes he’s rambling. He sets the container on the kitchen counter, taking a deep breath. Something in the air is getting on his nerves, and he can’t quite put his finger on it.

“Cold is fine,” Luo Binghe says simply. He looks at the microwave with a strange suspicion when Shen Yuan places the plate he just filled for Luo Binghe inside, and he almost seems startled when Shen Yuan presses the buttons that respond with beeps. “Heat is harmful to ice demons.”

“Then it be cold,” Shen Yuan sighs, serving a separate bowl for Mobei Jun. He stirs it around a bit; he’s not entirely sure it’s a very good culinary experience, but whatever. It’s not like he wants to harm his son’s Mobei-bofu. “That makes me wonder. I mean, do demons in the North eat cold food because cooked foods cool down faster due to exposure to the extreme weather and, well, the ice palace, those who work for Mobei Jun, or do they usually eat raw food without needing to cook it to eat it? That would be extremely limiting in terms of recipes, although it would also make sense, because it's not like grain grows in the frozen tundra and they can make adequate plantations to support a different percentage of their diet

than game. Even more so since they were outside of trade agreements with the southern demons, who do have a lot of grain and fruit plantations and such. Although honestly, I don't think it's healthy to eat raw meat all the time, even if they're demons. Or does being demons give them some kind of resistance to the bacteria that uncooked meat can have, especially from wild beasts of the north? Are their bodies already born prepared to digest raw meat, like similar predators? I mean, I know there's monster meat which can be beneficial to cultivation even among cultivators, but beyond that... Although also, does it have the same benefit for demons? Or does eating them raw seek to generate some kind of immunity that...?"

Shen Yuan is abruptly interrupted by the microwave's final beep. Two minutes of rambling. Oh. How embarrassing.

“Ah,” he’s suddenly hyperaware that he’s been completely rambling. He rubs his face, uncomfortable. “Sorry. Uh, I tend to get excited about-…”

“Don't apologize,” Luo Binghe says. Shen Yuan swallows, daring to look at him. His gaze… well. He doesn’t look annoyed, or irritated either. It’s more like he’s endlessly curious. Shen Yuan supposes it makes sense; in truth, he doesn’t have much of an idea how Luo Binghe crossed into his world and what kind of knowledge he’s operating under beyond accepting and letting it all happen. He supposes it must be amusing for someone as know-it-all as Luo Binghe to hear all Shen Yuan’s silly questions. “Yuan-ge can go on. They are interesting questions.”

Shen Yuan clicks his tongue. He takes the bowl out of the microwave, stirring the food to check that it's heated evenly throughout. It seems to be, so he hands the bowl to Luo Binghe.

He accepts it with the beginnings of a smile. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Ha ha, how funny, the curious little human serving as a servant. He rummages through the drawers for the chopsticks and spoon, sulking only a little. His bad mood doesn't even quite hit him; he still feels too good to force himself to be bad.

“This Lord thinks,” Luo Binghe says a moment later, “that prior to the imports and trade between the demon realms under this Emperor’s rule, the North consumed game, fish, and frozen meat from merchant caravans. Produce like vegetables and grains were scarce and expensive to consume or trade. With the unification of the realms, planting crops in the northern regions is favorable, given that certain seeds potentially draw on the demonic qi of the environment rather than the nutrients of the earth.”

“That’s…” Shen Yuan tries to close his jaw. Wow. *Wow.* That’s honestly more than he had expected in the first place. “Interesting.”

“This Lord doesn’t have *all* the knowledge Yuan-ge has formulated to answer,” Luo Binghe explains, and there’s something in his voice that makes him sound less irritating than usual. Probably accepting that there is knowledge beyond his reach, which is clearly the least bit of humility. “However, this Lord can share with Yuan-ge what he knows of his Empire and how it has progressed during his reign.”

Shen Yuan watches Luo Binghe closely. The open offer is… a pretty good consideration, if he's being honest. There are a lot of things that PIDW left untouched, or didn't address:

places that were once desert-like and then reappeared teeming with life, cursed forests that were suddenly inhabited, a vast amount of confusion and chaos that seemed only fit to create convenient settings with more convenient scenes. Shen Yuan… well. He'd always railed against all the plot holes that could be filled with information necessary to understand what happened in between.

It's even curious that Luo Binghe has been like that all along. And, at the same time, it's to be expected. *Who else* but Luo Binghe, after all?

“I would appreciate it,” Shen Yuan exhales. He picks up the bowl of noodles and broth to take to Mobei Jun, cold and all. Mobei Jun is sitting on a cushion on the floor, unfazed, while Chengle is explaining to him the fine workings of his new tiger house, now with room for baby tigers and ladders in case they can’t jump around. “Lord Mobei, I hope you don’t dislike the food of this world too much.”

Mobei Jun doesn't seem to find it unpleasant. Luo Binghe takes his seat in the sofa with his bowl in his hands, and only then does Shen Yuan realize the utter ridiculousness of the situation. He takes his phone out of his pocket and takes a quick pic.

ShenY: [image]

ShenY: Guess.

ShangHH: ????????????

ShangHH: WHO IS THAT HOT GUY

ShangHH: AND WHY AM I NOT INVITED IN YOUR DAMN APARTMENT?????????

ShangHH: LIKE RIGHT NOW?????

ShangHH: BRO?????????

ShenY: You mean icy guy.

ShenY: Luo Binghe brought Mobei Jun to visit.

ShangHH: HE IS THE FUCKING MOBEI JUN????

ShangHH: ???!??!?!?!?!??!!??!?!??

ShangHH: im arriving in 30 fuck the rent bro ill take a didi

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. He puts his phone away and, with a sigh, sits next to Luo Binghe on the sofa, where he's looking intently between Chengle and Mobei Jun, still clutching the towel over his shoulders, his futile attempts at drying his hair abandoned in favor of eating.

His brow furrowed slightly again, but there's no hostile expression on his face. In fact, it's almost funny to watch: he seems to be concentrating, paying full attention to every word coming out of Chengle's mouth.

Shen Yuan sighs, smiling. Well. *At least* Luo Binghe is making a visible effort. As long as it benefits Chengle, it's not like Shen Yuan is going to complain.

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Airplane's visit is abrupt. He arrives exactly half an hour later, covered in nearly melted slush, his nose red and his fingers frozen. Shen Yuan is already pouring him some warm water to help him warm up, and Airplane is still shivering as Chengle runs up to him.

“Uncle Ai-plein!” the boy squeals. He hugs and squeezes him so tightly that Shen Yuan knows it must hurt. Airplane hasn’t even taken off his shoes when Chengle is already dragging him by the wrist. “Did you come to play with me? Nainai gave me Legos. They’re pretty and colorful and I can make so many things! Do you want to play with my Legos? I built a tiger house, and a tall, tall tower! For birds. Birds like the Jeweled Phoenix! I like it a lot. It’s sad when it catches fire. But it turns into another phoenix with different jewels in its feathers! It’s so pretty! It can be all the jewels!”

“Ah” Airplane seems to have been hit with five different kinds of tenderness and explosive emotions. He finishes taking off his shoes and accepts the slippers Shen Yuan pushes in his direction with his foot, a little shaky. Shen Yuan has no idea if it’s because of nerves or the fact that he’s still not used to the warmer climate of the apartment in contrast to the outside. “Oh, yeah. Yeah. Legos. They’re great. Let’s play with Legos!”

Luo Chengle drags Airplane by the wrist, hopping like a bunny, with a wide and happy smile.

“Mobei-bofu!” he squeals, jumping and pulling Airplane by the hand, who stumbles a little to keep up with him with the stupidest expression on his face. “This is Uncle Ai-plein! He is favorite human uncle! He plays with me and we make snowmen and he makes bunny apples and he makes up the coolest tales. Let’s play!”

Shen Yuan laughs a little at Airplane's red face as he's dragged in front of a clearly expressionless Mobei Jun, who doesn't seem too thrilled about having to share his spot as favorite uncle. Anyway, Shen Yuan smiles, takes a few pictures, and leaves them be.

Luo Binghe approaches him so silently that when Shen Yuan realizes he is behind him he almost screams out loud.

“God,” he murmurs, taking a strangled breath. “You almost scared me to death.”

“Is this Lord *that* scary?” And for some reason, when Luo Binghe says it, he almost seems to be bragging about it. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

“Oh, you terrify my fragile heart.” Shen Yuan places his hand on his chest, then brings it to his forehead. “I shall faint before you, oh great and mighty Emperor Imbecile,” he snorts, rolling his eyes. It’s clear Luo Binghe is holding back a laugh from the way his mouth curls.

“You surprised me, you big idiot. What are these manners of trailing silently behind people, really? I’m sure someone must have stabbed you for it.”

“They tried,” Luo Binghe says, so simply that Shen Yuan snorts. “Of course, Yuan-ge should know that no one can even attempt to stab this Lord without suffering consequences.”

“Of course,” Shen Yuan says, and turns as quickly as he can to dig his fingers into Luo Binghe’s ribs. Which isn’t entirely a good thing to do, because it’s painful for his fingers, but Luo Binghe flinches as if he genuinely hadn’t expected it. Bah. And where are those super-developed Protagonist senses right now, huh? Score to Shen Yuan! “I stabbed you. Where are the consequences now? *Dare*.”

Luo Binghe's eyes are still slightly open. Now, his mouth actually spreads into a wide smile just before he starts laughing. It's not a loud laugh, and for exactly one moment, Shen Yuan feels a stupid whiplash: his wide smile spreads first with surprise, then genuinely, as if Luo Binghe, like his son, is surprised to find a reason to laugh.

“Yuan-ge is *bold,”* he says, and Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. He reaches for his cane on instinct, realizing again that he has no idea where he put it because he’s standing without pain, and nearly shrieks when Luo Binghe takes a step in his direction, his claws *clearly* threatening on the hand he extends towards his face. “To dare to *stab* this Lord. If Yuan-ge thinks he can do it without consequences…”

Shen Yuan nearly catches his breath as Luo Binghe takes another step closer. Then he lets it out in a laugh as Luo Binghe's threat loses all force at the exact moment a massive Lego tower slams into the side of his head, shattering into pieces with Legos flying in all directions.

“Chengle!” Shen Yuan scolds, still clutching his stomach with laughter. A little further on, his son’s devilishly small face is an absolute delight to behold, with bright, beautiful red eyes. “Be careful with your toys! And don’t throw things to your father,” he finally mumbles, bending down to pick up the pieces. Then, halfway across, he straightens up with his arms crossed, quite certain that indulging his son in this *is not* a good idea. “And come and pick these up. They’re your toys, you little devil. You throw them, you pick them up.”

Luo Chengle pouts profusely, his eyes shining.

“But Father Emperor threatened Yuan-ge!” the boy shrieks. Shen Yuan glances at Luo Binghe, who, with his stunned expression, actually looks as if he doesn’t know how to react. Rather than looking like he’s been thrown Legos, he looks like someone has thrown a bucket of cold water over him.

“He didn’t mean it,” Shen Yuan admits. Even if he had, he supposes, he wouldn’t have done it in front of so many witnesses… Shen Yuan wants to believe. “I know you meant well, but I’m fine. I promise. Now, pick up your toys.”

Luo Chengle's eyes are shining and his cheeks are still puffed out with indignation, but he simply nods in a very resigned manner. He stands up and runs to pick up the Lego pieces

scattered on the floor. Across from Shen Yuan, Luo Binghe looks at him with an arched eyebrow.

Only when Shen Yuan realizes he should probably be waiting for something else does he exhale and, still with his arms crossed, try to look at Chengle sternly. The boy just gives him the biggest, cutest puppy dog eyes, and Shen Yuan has to make a huge, gigantic, unnatural effort to say: “And apologize to your father.”

The indignant sound Chengle makes is as if Shen Yuan has stabbed him in the chest. Still, Shen Yuan stands his ground. That's supposedly what discipline is all about. Even if Luo Binghe deserves... well, *many* of his behaviors clearly deserve having Legos thrown at his head, the fact is that *for once* Luo Binghe wasn't posing as a potential threat.

Luo Chengle seems to decide that he can't really win by pouting. Sighing, he ducks his little head and murmurs a low, weak, "I'm so sorry, Father Emperor. I shouldn't have thrown Legos at your head." Then, with a little imp-like glare that makes Shen Yuan let out an exasperated sigh, Chengle adds, "Chengle won't do it again, as long as Father Emperor doesn't threaten Yuan-ge again!"

And he finishes gathering his Legos, running back to the coffee table. Airplane stands with a pale face and his hand over his mouth, as if he's seeing a ghost. Only when Shen Yuan looks at the slight, sly smile crossing Mobei Jun's face can Shen Yuan guess that he hasn't done anything truly wrong.

Chengle continues to play animatedly. He doesn't throw out hateful comments or throw a tantrum over having to apologize. Shen Yuan sighs, daring to stand on his tiptoes to examine the spot on the side of Luo Binghe's head where the Lego tower hit; there's no wound whatsoever, which is wonderful, but also expected. It's not as if a simple blow with a Lego tower, no matter how surprising and painful, is anything that could be expected against a Heavenly Demon.

Luo Binghe remains frozen in the place, still and barely breathing, as if his mind is just synapsing all the actions that occurred around him.

“Anyway,” he shrugs. Shen Yuan moves his hands away from Luo Binghe’s head, patting him on the shoulder a little sadly. What a poor example his upbringing of Chengle has set so far, really… “I’m sorry about that. Chengle isn’t usually this impulsive. I mean, he *is*. Sometimes. But much less so than this.”

Luo Binghe exhales slowly. He looks as if he's trying to control his temper, so Shen Yuan wisely moves his hand away from him, crossing both of them behind his back, walking around him only a little to examine as subtly as he can that his hands still look like normal nails and not sharp claws ready to sink into someone or, worse, *something*. He doesn't want to hand Airplane a trashed apartment.

Under his gaze, Luo Binghe seems to tense up even more, so Shen Yuan moves away as subtly as he can.

"…this Lord see," Luo Binghe says finally. He looks completely bewildered. Shen Yuan doesn't know what exactly made him look that way, but he hopes it doesn't last too long. He seems more unpredictable than usual. And right after: "He broke his toy."

"Oh, no," Shen Yuan exhales a little. Well, that's something he can answer. "He can build with Legos, and then take them apart and put them back together. It's not broken, it just came apart, and he can put it back together, or put something else together. That's the fun part."

"Oh," and Luo Binghe looks rather puzzled. Shen Yuan supposes it makes some kind of sense, to be honest. It's not like in the xianxia world there are things that can be broken and still be used. For Luo Binghe, it must have been a huge shock that his son decided to 'break' his own toy just to get it away from the pathetic human caretaker, Shen Yuan supposes. "And you didn't punish him for it?"

Shen Yuan raises an eyebrow.

"Should I?" he asks, crossing his arms over his chest again. "He's just a child. He took his scolding, took responsibility for his actions, and apologized. It was rude of him, that's true, and he *shouldn't do* it again." He glances in Chengle's direction, who seems to be easily moving on, now putting together a taller tower. Airplane is holding the base and trying to keep it from tipping over, while Mobei Jun is sorting loose Legos into rows of the same size and color for Chengle to use. "He made a mistake. If he makes another mistake, he'll get another scolding. If he does it again and doesn't plan to change, time out for him to think about his actions and why they were wrong. He's a smart kid and he'll understand."

Luo Binghe hums something, a weak nod. Then, he turns to look at Shen Yuan with something… strange. It's the kind of strange, intense gaze that makes his skin crawl. Shen Yuan looks away only because he doesn't really feel up to holding that kind of dark, intense gaze.

"What if he doesn't learn from his mistakes?" he asks. Shen Yuan snorts. As if Shen Yuan couldn't raise his son any more properly, anyway! He's been doing well so far! … he thinks. "What will Yuan-ge do if he keeps messing up, acting like this, and destroying everything?"

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Well, subtle, isn't it, Luo Binghe? Which Heavenly Demon exactly are we talking about here, really?

"I wouldn't use violence against Chengle, if that's what *Junshang* is asking," he says quietly. He knows it's probably a futile attempt, because all the demons will be able to hear him no matter how loudly he speaks. He just hopes Chengle doesn't care enough about his boring conversation with his father to pay attention. "What good does violence do a child? They don't learn obedience, they learn fear. If you punish disobedience with violence, you don't create a violent child, you create a *resentful one*. Violence is merely a weapon, no matter what pretext it's used under. The duty of a parent, a caregiver, a *master*," he looks at Luo Binghe with a raised eyebrow when he flinches, "is *to educate*, not to frighten, humiliate, or subdue. To teach them under what contexts to use such violence, in your world. To teach them how to contain it and promote it only recreationally, in this world. I will never do anything that could harm Chengle, no matter what mistake he makes."

“I see,” Luo Binghe says, after a moment of tense silence. His body moves as he swells with a deep breath that he exhales slowly. “This Lord understands. Yuan-ge is wise.”

“Not at all,” Shen Yuan says, smiling only a little. “I have never approved of violence toward children. I will never agree with it, and I don’t think it will ever create anything but pain. After all, violence breeds violence. It’s not an irreversible act,” he hastens to add. Shen Yuan doesn’t entirely like the expression Luo Binghe is putting on. “Someone who is violent because of their violent upbringing can choose to break the cycle. *To be* different. It’s not easy, of course. It will never be easy to break a pattern created by violence, but *it is possible*. It’s an everyday decision, in every situation. But it’s a decision that would be made if someone wants change. And it is a decision, so something as simple yet powerful as deciding is within everyone’s reach.”

Luo Binghe hums a nod. He leans against the wall right next to Shen Yuan, his arms crossed over his chest. It's ridiculous how tight that sweater is on him, and even more ridiculous how defined his muscles look when he flexes them so effortlessly. Shen Yuan is almost embarrassed to look at him. It's definitely not good for any skinny, sickly little man like him to have the Protagonist in his apartment! Just look at him! There's no way tight clothes look *that* good on anyone!

“Yuan-ge grumbled so much about being called Shizun, and yet he possesses the wisdom of one,” Luo Binghe hums, and Shen Yuan snorts, rolling his eyes. Seriously, where’s his cane when he needs it? He doesn’t think he has the moral strength to just slap Luo Binghe away. Besides, his own hand was sore from slapping him that last time, and now his fingers sting from where he pulled his little prank. And then, with a slow exhalation that almost makes him look as if he’s shrinking in place, Luo Binghe mutters, “This Emperor… would have been pleased if Yuan-ge had been his Shizun.”

Shen Yuan opens his mouth to complain. Then he closes it. It's like his own head is throwing up a fucking blue screen.

“Well,” he agrees, unable to stop himself from laughing. Luo Binghe gives him a strange look, but Shen Yuan can’t, *really can’t,* stop himself from smiling about it. Like, what the fuck? That’s actually kind of funny, in retrospect. “Anyone’s better than *Shen Qingqiu*. I mean,” he looks Luo Binghe up and down, “I know you’re, well, a great and powerful Demon Emperor now. But, hey. You used to be such a sweet, adorable kid, I never could have treated you badly.”

That's the truest thing Shen Yuan has ever said about Luo Binghe, if he's honest with himself. After all, when he'd originally started reading PIDW, it hadn't been *for* Emperor Luo Binghe. It had been for little, sad White Lotus Luo Binghe, that sweet, sad-eyed boy who lived through tragedy after tragedy, building up his courage and strength, growing through the chapters, forging himself. He was a weak, fragile, *sensitive* boy. He was a young one who, day after day, chapter after chapter, hardened his heart a little more, but never lost hope, rising up resiliently, growing where others had hurt him.

Yes, Shen Yuan had been *fascinated by* monsters when Airplane came across them. Of course, who wouldn't be!? The world-building, beyond the papapa plants and all of those wife plots, was *incredible.* The plot—or lack thereof, when it came to the wife-gathering arcs

—left a lot to be desired, but Luo Binghe was a well-rounded and complex character from the start, and the world he inhabited stretched out before him, ready to be discovered and conquered under his power.

But, from the beginning, it had *always been Luo Binghe*.

Luo Binghe's expression is strange for a moment. It's raw, open. Shen Yuan feels like his eyes are like an open wound, festering. It's strange to see him, because even with that large body and bearing, he suddenly also looks like a child whose wounds have not yet fully healed.

Then, the smile that curves his face is gentle. The gentlest smile Shen Yuan has ever seen on Luo Binghe, and the most sincere, he thinks, so far.

“I see,” Luo Binghe says, so quietly that Shen Yuan feels he’s whispering to him. “This Emperor *really* understands, now.”

Luo Binghe doesn't develop, and Shen Yuan just snorts. Well, cryptic! Melodramatic! Not that Shen Yuan could expect anything else from Luo Binghe, anyway. Cryptic and melodramatic were two adjectives that could describe him perfectly right after his darkening arc.

Although, all the same… Shen Yuan glances at Luo Binghe out of the corner of his eye, and finds himself smiling. Ah, the big melodramatic one. Even if Shen Yuan can't stop wanting to hit him, shake him, and throw him out of his apartment the moment he remembers what a bad father he was to his sweet little son. He supposes Luo Binghe has the right to be such a resentful melodramatic drama queen, after all the suffering in his life.

He supposes it's a good thing that Luo Binghe can now understand that he has the right and freedom to break the cycle and move forward outside of what his past has made of him.

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When the sun has set quite a bit and Shen Yuan has decided to pack some dumplings for Airplane to have in his apartment while Chengle is taking a warm bath and Luo Binghe has already taken Mobei Jun back, Airplane boards him.

“Bro,” he says, his face scrunching up in a weird sort of grimace. “Are you on meds? I mean, painkillers? It’s not like I’m going to rat you out to your brother again, I promise. I mean, *you can* tell me, but,” his face takes on the kind of bitter, complicated expression that makes Shen Yuan snort, “it’ll be bad for you. You just got out of the hospital man, and, uh. It was kind of shit. I was scared something really bad was going to happen to you.”

Shen Yuan sighs.

“My brother stole all my painkillers,” he says, as he packs a few dumplings. He’s pretty sure there *really* are too many. At least half of them will get bad if he doesn’t share some of them. “I’m not taking anything other than the limited pills he left for me.”

Airplane has a complicated grimace. Finally, he seems to gather his courage and says: "You're not using your cane."

"Huh?" Shen Yuan looks at him, one eyebrow raised.

"You're not using your cane," Airplane repeats quickly, as if he might regret putting it off. "And you've been. I don't know. Perky. Less grumpy. You haven't complained of pain once, and you've been standing for *a long time* without any problems. Bro, seriously, if you're, I don't know, high with something…"

Shen Yuan, lacking his cane, hits Airplane with his dishcloth.

"You're worrying about *nothing*," he complains, huffing. For a moment, it's almost embarrassing. He feels exposed in a way he dislikes to the bone, the heat rising from his chest to his face, a feeling of humiliation searing above his ears. He hadn't noticed how reliant he'd become on his cane in all the times he'd seen Airplane. It makes sense, he supposes: Airplane has seen him at his fucking worst, barely able to move. It's obvious the hack writer will find it odd, to say the least, to see him walking without a damn support. "I'm not taking any more medication except the prescribes one in the doses of my brother left to me. It's…" He tries to find the right way to explain it. "Luo Binghe is helping me."

"Are you *sleeping* with him?" Airplane asks, and Shen Yuan immediately hits him again with his dishcloth. And again. *And again*. "Bro, bro! It's just-…! Hey, that last one hurt!"

"What's wrong with you? Of course I don't sleep with Luo Binghe," Shen Yuan protests. The humiliation hitting him now is too close to hysteria. Sleeping with him! Ha! "I'm a *man*, Luo Binghe is extremely straight, for God's sake. Just because I'm taking care of Chengle doesn't mean I've grown breasts in the middle of my chest, really. What's *wrong* with you, really?"

Airplane shifts uncomfortably. His face has a sour expression, like he's just bitten into a lemon.

"Well," he begins, then seems to back down when Shen Yuan narrows his eyes at him. "I mean! I don't know. You two were talking today and… I don't know. You seemed like, to understand each other," Airplane mumbles, his tone almost sulking.

"Well, I've basically adopted his son. Chengle is also my son now. And if he wants to be a part of *my* son's life, we'll eventually have to… *understand* each other," Shen Yuan says simply. Airplane lets out a sigh that sounds more tragic than it should, in Shen Yuan's opinion. "Which is difficult. He's a pain in the ass."

"And *you say* you're not sleeping with him…"

Shen Yuan keeps hitting Airplane with his dishcloth until the little man's glasses nearly fall off, and Airplane squeals and begs him to please not because a pair with his prescription costs the same as two months' rent. So Shen Yuan switches from physical aggression to giving him his optician's number and telling him to just give him the bill so he can replace those weak plastic frames, because they honestly look old enough to break at any moment.

Airplane leaves when the Didi that Shen Yuan asked for him arrives, carrying a container of frozen dumplings and giving Shen Yuan his sizes so he can send him some elegant clothes for the Christmas dinner. The dumbfuck author leaves, muttering something about being a sugar baby that makes Shen Yuan want to jump in and continue hitting him, which shouldn't be a thing in and of itself, but there's something about Airplane that makes Shen Yuan feel exceptionally wild.

Only when Airplane has left and Shen Yuan has made sure that Chengle's bath water remains warm, does he rummage around until he finds his cane under the sofa. He takes it out, sneezing a little at the dust accumulated underneath, and after wiping it with a disinfectant tissue, he carries it to place it next to the bed.

Then he stands there, staring at it, with a tight feeling in his chest that is far from physical pain, but piercing him so deeply that it could be.

Chapter End Notes

SY: Well, if you had been my disciple, I would never have treated you like that :)
LBG: I'm having some not-so-appropriate thoughts with that picture right now

This chapter has SO MANY FEELINGS. I can't fully express them; it was just FUN to give SY five minutes to be Peerless Cucumber again and put aside, for a moment, being Chengle's dad. The two can coexist, sure, but it's bittersweet how SY is hyper-focused on one thing or the other. My boy only sees random little flickers of light in his life and clings to them tooth and nail. I want to hug him really tight while crying with him (because right now, bro, same)

Today's hit wasn't moral (yes, it was, a little) but it was from Chengle!!! Cheers to him! (Don't tell Shen Yuan, he'll scold us all)
There were many theories about what our beloved demons went to investigate. I MUST SAY some were close, but I won't say who :D
AND YES! AIRPLANE HAS FULFILLED ITS BIGGEST AND ONLY DREAM (meeting his perfect man in a black turtleneck sweater that looked like it was about to rip over his pecs. Honestly, how delightful, I don't know how Airplane didn't transmigrate with just that glimpse)

LBG: We're flirting
SY: We're doing anything but flirting
And they'll continue like that, unfortunately, for a long time to come

More than physically hitting LBG, I like mentally hitting him. A couple of words that can destabilize and collapse the world he's standing on. Just a couple of things no one had the courage or the audacity to stand by him and say. The possibility of, how difficult can it be to change? Only as difficult as his own strength allows. I mean, this man is slowly moving towards redemption. He still has a few chaotic ups and downs ahead, but

hey, he's TRYING somehow (and it shows!!! I'm proud of him, even though the bar is still in the abyss)

Airplane cares so much about his bro *hugs him* I think the natural reaction of anyone who knows what the heavenly pillar can do would immediately assume what methods Shen Yuan is taking to heal himself from Bingge. It's the most natural thing in terms of what PIDW is, right? :P

As an aside (sorry for the very long), it actually makes me feel good to feel like this fic isn't just entertaining and amusing you, but also supporting you through your tough times. I'm so amazed every time you tell me that my way of representing disability touches you so deeply, when the truth is that I just project a lot of my experiences with pain, and it's surprising that something like this, and seeing it reflected and dealing with it, is something you find so positive and representative. I'm SO grateful for all your wonderful words always. Thank you :') you move me to tears today and always

OK, SO MUCH CHATTER, REALLY, SORRY, I'M GOING ON FOR TOO LONG. THANK YOU FOR READING, THANK YOU FOR CONTINUING TO JOIN ME ON THIS JOURNEY. I HOPE YOU ENJOYED TODAY'S CHAPTER. YOU KNOW: KUDO-COMMENT-INTERACTION I'M HERE FOR YOU!!!!! THANK YOU HUGS AND KISSES
SEE YOU SOON :D

Chapter 16: Eighth and ninth day out - chaos before Christmas

Chapter Notes

> WE'VE SURPASSED... 100K....
> CONGRATULATIONS, YOU READ 100K IN *looks at calendar* 15 days or less, depending on when you started this. WOW. I'M FUCKING IN SHOCK. THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR BEING WITH ME THIS ENTIRE JOURNEY, SERIOUSLY!!!!!
> I know you're worried, and I've been doing great so far!! But just last night I had a HORRIBLE night of insomnia (I slept for about 3 hours?????) and between that and some respiratory spasms due to the change in weather (I have a pollen allergy. Guess who lives next to a fucking park? I'm having a very bad time), honestly, I'll take a break and come back on Wednesday, and we'll see if it's daily or every other day :P I'll take advantage of it to see if I can get 1-2 chapters ahead and not be writing on the day of publication so we have a little bit of peace of mind for all of us :D
>
> Chapter warnings: lots of emotions and more internalized ableism. Yes, I'm sending Shen Yuan to therapy, but it won't be today
>
> Enjoy the chapter!! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even though he knows it's a dream, Shen Yuan doesn't really attach much importance to it. It's not a place he's familiar with, but the details are rich, as if he's been there a thousand times, or at least enough to be able to locate the space with a faint familiarity: the air smells of sunshine, pine, and incense, and when he walks through gardens lined with tall bamboo, it's as if everything is right around him.

“Shizun!” a small voice reaches him. It’s a little hesitant, soft. Shen Yuan has only a moment of confusion —doesn’t that sound too similar to Chengle?— before blinking, as if his mind were invaded by cotton wool from all directions, turning around.

And there's the sweet little bun. He's older than Chengle, of course: he's not even twelve, maybe. He looks so skinny, so little. His hair is so, so messy, and his big eyes look shifty. They're dark shadows of a wayward little pup that stops halfway, staring at him with a tense expression.

Shen Yuan recognizes that perhaps his clothes don't belong to him. He has never worn robes, not even when he cosplayed a few times in his teens. Yet he doesn't feel the weight of a long wig or hair sprouting from his head with all its adornments. And though there's a fan in his hand instead of a cane, the coolness of the wind sways his neck, and it's just as if sleep has clothed him in silk but preserved him as he was in waking life.

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan finds himself saying, because who else but the little white lotus Luo Binghe? He supposes it makes a ridiculous amount of sense. He’s been thinking about all of this a lot lately. “Come here. What’s the urgency?”

Luo Binghe approaches. His steps falter a little, but he finally ends up in front of him, bowing. When he straightens, it's with a confused expression, a frightened face. Ah, a poor stray kitten waiting for a blow just for coming closer, really.

“Shizun,” repeats little Luo Binghe, and when he is about to speak again, he says again: “Shizun, Shizun…”

“Aiya,” Shen Yuan sighs. What a boy, he thinks, as he reaches out to pat the little bun’s head. Even if Luo Binghe tenses—and how could the little bun do anything but tense up? That hideous Shizun of his has only hurt him!—Shen Yuan only pats gently, leaving his hand on his head, on those messy locks. Luo Binghe pushes his head against his hand, like a puppy seeking more petting, and Shen Yuan finds himself smiling, scratching the boy’s scalp with his fingers. “Ah, what a clingy little boy. Come here, come here.”

Shen Yuan *knows* it's a dream, and all the more so because the colors and shapes are erratic: it behaves like a fleeting, entirely incomprehensible dreamscape, with uneven blurring even around the details. One moment they are in a garden, with Shen Yuan pulling the little boy into an embrace, and the next moment they are inside a cozy, homey little house, and Shen Yuan has the little boy sitting in front of him while he runs a brush through his hair.

There are clear inaccuracies in the dream: suddenly, little Luo Binghe's hair is now wet, and Shen Yuan takes it with great delicacy to brush and care for these curls. He takes the trouble to do it as carefully as possible so as not to cause him any pain. He separates each strand with care, brushing it, undoing each of its knots. There is a small braid on one side, very tangled, which he only undoes with extreme care; it must be painful, he thinks. Poor little thing, holding something there for so long, which must hurt so much to tangle, and without the necessary care.

Then, when his hair is soft, tangle-free curls, he gives him a small braid. And another. And another. He decorates braids with colorful silks through his hair, neat curls sprouting from a sweet braided crown. Someday, that little Luo Binghe will be a Demon Emperor worthy of a metaphorical crown, far more luxurious and heavier than the one now adorning him. But for now, he's just a child being properly pampered.

Little Luo Binghe has crystal-clear tears in his eyes, and only then does Shen Yuan pull him into a tight hug, where the sweet little bun collapses into tears that make him tremble all over. The walls tremble, reality peels like old paint, they are in the garden under the sun, then under the red sun, then in the little and fallen into disrepair house again.

And the little Luo Binghe cries, cries, and cries. Ah, poor, poor, adorable child, so hurt, so sad. But he has nothing to worry about. Shen Yuan will not be able to prevent this white lotus from being hurt, but for now, he can pamper him, wipe his tears, and take care of him as he deserves.

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Shen Yuan wakes painlessly, his eyes moist, his muscles unhinged. There's only a strange afterglow from the dream that fades the more he blinks, stretching, unable to remember in much detail more than sunshine and bamboo. He stretches easily and enjoys a bit of the bliss of being free from the hardships of existing in his own body for a brief, lazy eternity, holding Chengle as his sweet boy sleeps, clinging to his embrace even in his sleep.

Only then, when he opens his pillbox upon getting out of bed, does he realize he has no more medication to take. Which of course means he doesn't have to wait long for Shen Jiu to come and refill his pillbox. His good mood worsens exponentially.

After taking a nice hot bath, getting himself all dolled up so he doesn't look so sickly, even going so far as to dig out his BB cream from the back of his bathroom drawer and slathering on lots of moisturizer so his hands don't look parched, he practically throws himself into heating up the mashed vegetables, his stomach *growling*.

Luo Binghe is already awake, wearing a new, skin-tight sweater, and stirring a pot, looking at him curiously.

“Good morning. Starting today,” Shen Yuan says, leaning over the counter as he watches the plate spin in the microwave with an anticipation that has him almost shaking. “I can eat *some* soft solids. Like purees. Stewed fruit and stuff like that. And soon my brother will come by to refill my pillbox.”

“Good morning,” Luo Binghe says softly, continuing to stir what looks like good congee, its scent extremely appetizing. “Which of Yuan-ge’s brothers is coming?”

“Jiu-ge,” Shen Yuan says, drumming his fingers on the counter waiting for his bowl of mashed vegetables. “I didn’t tell you about my brothers, did I? I thought you’d seen them. I mean, I could feel, like, qi or something”he makes a vague motion with his hand in the air “when I was in the hospital. It gave me goosebumps, by the way. Creepy.”

“…Jiu?” Luo Binghe asks abruptly. Shen Yuan raises his head to look at him, finding that he’s even stopped stirring his pot. The congee is bubbling, and the wooden spoon is there, still in his hand. “Like, Shen Jiu?”

“Well, yes?” Shen Yuan gestures. “He’s also my father’s son, he can’t have any other family name. He’s the second son. My older brother, my Da-ge, is Shen Mingsu. Weren’t you spying on me or something at the hospital?”

“No,” Luo Binghe admits. There’s a complicated expression on his face that Shen Yuan isn’t entirely sure he understands. “I was… This Lord was trying to track Yuan-ge. With no golden core or no spiritual veins, it’s… more complicated. However, this Lord left an imprint of his own qi on Yuan-ge in… *that* dream. It was much larger in the apartment, but when Yuan-ge wasn’t there, this Emperor could only follow a far, distant trail, not knowing how to reach him.”

“Wow,” as interesting as that sounds, at that moment the microwave beeps, and Shen Yuan is opening the microwave door almost before the first beep has finished. He dips his spoon into the mashed vegetables and lets himself melt at the taste against his mouth, and most of all, at

the texture of something other than liquid. “Oh my God, that’s the best thing I’ve eaten in *weeks*,” he whines, probably looking like a dramatic bastard, but what the hell. He has the right.

“If this lord had known that Yuan-ge could eat more food from today on, he would have prepared something,” he says, pointing at the pot. His brow furrows slightly. “This Lord… is making congee for Chengle. And broth for Yuan-ge.”

“I still need broth,” he almost complains, sighing. “Little by little. I just needed…” he takes another spoonful of the puree, enjoying the small pleasure. He’s never eaten something made with so much mashed vegetables with such taste or hunger. “I was *starving*.”

Luo Binghe hums something that sounds a bit like a laugh. Shen Yuan continues eating, standing there, just enjoying every bite. Honestly, it's incredible that something so simple tastes so good. He can barely detect any extra seasoning, but it's as if Luo Binghe has cooked the vegetables just right so that each of the flavors is just right without being overwhelming to the palate, without any bitterness or unpleasant sensations against his tongue. Truly, great culinary skills on the part of the Protagonist! Shen Yuan can almost feel happy about that. Perks of having adopted his son, he supposes. Exquisite food!

“What are Yuan-ge’s brothers like?” Luo Binghe asks after a long moment. Shen Yuan makes a questioning, curious sound. “This Lord… doesn’t know much about Yuan-ge’s family. They seem close.”

“They are, I think,” Shen Yuan says. He hesitates a little. “My family is… well. They have very close lives,” he explains, shrugging. “They’re closer with each other than they are with me. I have a hard time keeping up, so I fall behind, but I *choose* to fall behind, so… it’s okay. It’s easier than keeping up.”

“I see,” Luo Binghe hums. He says it in a way that makes Shen Yuan wander, thinking exactly how to introduce Luo Binghe to his brothers.

“Well, my Da-ge, Mingsu, is actually very autistic. Uh, I’ll explain what it is later, he’s just… well, you’ll figure out exactly when you meet him.” Shen Yuan fiddles with his spoon when Luo Binghe gestures curiously in his direction. “He’s a martial arts *fanatic*. If you give him the chance, he could talk about it for hours without noticing that other people around him aren’t interested. He’s blunt, and quite rude at times. But he’s a good brother.” Shen Yuan falls silent, thinking with the last spoonful of his puree. He’s not a crazy person who’ll cram that much food into his stomach at once. “And Jiu-ge… well, he’s a bit of a bitch.”

Luo Binghe lets out something that sounds like a surprised laugh.

“Is he?” he says. Shen Yuan nods.

“Well, he’s moody, grumpy, impulsive,” Shen Yuan lists. “He says no, but he’s *too driven* by his emotions, and he is clearly emotionally unstable. He’s a big resentful of the smallest things, argumentative, hates being wrong, and acts like a five-year-old throwing a tantrum when he’s losing an argument… but, eh. I think he’s a good brother sometimes.” Shen Yuan shrugs, sighing and putting the rest of his mashed vegetables away for later. The last thing he

wants is to get sick to his stomach from eating too much and too quickly. “He’s the one who worries about me the most,” he blurts out, and he doesn’t know exactly why. It’s always been that way. “I guess he’s afraid something might happen to me. When we were kids, we were in the hospital too much for my fault, and Jiu-ge hated seeing me there. He takes care of me, even if it’s a pain the way he does.”

“Sounds like someone rude,” Luo Binghe murmurs. He’s gone back to stirring the congee. “This Lord isn’t sure he’ll… like me when we meet.”

“Don’t worry, Jiu-ge will probably do everything possible to make *you* dislike him, to get you to be rude to him, and to have a chance to jump on your throat with the slightest excuse,” Shen Yuan says, and Luo Binghe looks at him with a raised eyebrow. He doesn’t have to verbalize his curiosity. “He *always* does this. He provokes until someone makes the first move, and when that happens, he attacks like a rabid dog. He’s done it *all* his life,” he sighs, rubbing his face.

Dealing with Jiu-ge had been exhausting, to say the least. His teenage years had been *much* worse; by comparison, Shen Jiu was now calm and collected. Even his parents had been worried about him, even more so when his teenage years brought bouts of rebellion: Shen Jiu would disappear, sneak out of class, hide as if he were lost, secretly smoke and hang out with troublesome girls from other classes, and even have night terrors from which he would wake up terrified and confused.

“Don’t take it personally,” Shen Yuan clarifies. “I’m sure Jiu-ge would hate *me* if I weren’t his brother.”

Luo Binghe nods. His expression isn't too far from go to a bad way, so Shen Yuan keeps a safe distance to avoid any confrontation with him. He's considering how much of Ayi's food he has left and whether or not to ask her to come over this week—after all, they're on the verge of stuffing themselves with dumplings every meal if they want to finish them before they go bad, and Luo Binghe has brought enough food that Shen Yuan won't have to do any shopping anytime soon—when he hears the doorbell.

Sure enough, just as Shen Yuan expected, it is Shen Jiu.

“Are you *cooking?*” is the first thing Shen Jiu asks, almost pushing him as he enters the house. He’s wearing his office suit, carrying a pharmacy paper bag, and kicking off his shoes.

“Are you kidding? If I were cooking, neighbors would have called the fire department by now,” Shen Yuan shrugs. “Chengle’s father is cooking.”

“Ah,” Shen Jiu says. And then a moment later, he turns around, his eyes wide. Shen Yuan had never seen him get angry so quickly. “*What*?”

“Chengle’s father? His biological father?” Shen Yuan tilts his head. Shen Jiu’s face seems to have the worst expression of disgust in the universe. “Hey. I said he was going to the Christmas dinner, you can’t say I didn’t warn you that he-…”

“It’s *fucking eight in the fucking morning*,” Shen Jiu hisses, taking a menacing step toward him. “What the fuck time did he get here? Don’t fucking tell me you let him *stay here.*”

Shen Yuan gestures. The sound Shen Jiu makes is the closest thing a human can make to a grunt, Shen Yuan guesses, because the next thing he knows, Shen Jiu turns and strides toward the kitchen.

“Hey, hey!” Shen Yuan runs up to him, pulling on his arm. “Calm down. Hey. Jiu-ge…”

“Calm down?” Shen Jiu slaps his grip away. Shen Yuan is already reaching for his cane to whack him in the shin, noticing that he still doesn’t have it. He’s gotten so used to relying on it that for a moment it feels like losing his phone in the middle of the street. “*You*! How am I supposed to *calm down*? You told m*e* that asshole bastard just abandoned *his* son and just *disappeared.* And now he’s in your *damn apartment* where *your* son is too, trying to act like a cool dad and making breakfast right after *he abandoned him*...”

“Jiu-ge,” Shen Yuan tugs on his arm so his brother looks at him. He isn’t screaming, but he’s clearly on the verge of it, his eyes bloodshot and face twisted. “Calm down.”

Shen Jiu takes a deep breath. Then, with such a plastic expression that Shen Yuan grimaces, he steps out of the grip again with another slap on his hand. This is also the moment when he seems to notice that Shen Yuan is standing without any support, because he lets out a groan of frustration.

“Of course. Because you’re bringing the father who stepped aside into the same house as the child hurt and clearly traumatized by his shitty upbringing and *you want me* to calm down. What’s *wrong* with you?” Jiu-ge complains. “What, is he playing house now? The fucking happy family? What happens when he gets bored, or when he finds another woman to sleep with? Don’t think Mom didn’t tell me.” And even if Shen Jiu speaks venomously, Shen Yuan can only sigh. He can *understand* Jiu-ge’s reservations, of course. At the same time, he also wants to yell at him and shake him. Does he really think he would allow Luo Binghe to be in the same damn house if he could help it? Shen Yuan *was* the one who looked after Chengle all those weeks, doing his best to tear the boy away from his nightmares! Even now, he’s doing everything he can to give him some happiness and the family he needs and *deserves*! “I don’t need to know him to know he’s not a good person. I won’t allow him to play with you and *your* son like that.”

Shen Yuan lets out a tired sigh. He rubs his head, shaking his head.

“And what are you going to do?” he says. He crosses his arms over his chest, looking at him firmly. “Are you going to go and be shitty arrogant with him? Are you going to kick him out of *my* apartment as if you own it and have some right to it? Or are you going to demand a legal agreement? Are you going to act like a lawyer and file a lawsuit against him for child support and visitation time with third-party supervision? What are you going to do, Jiu-ge?” he asks.

Every question comes out too sharp, but he's *fed up.* He's tired. Shen Jiu's presence is only a reminder that he's restricting his medication, that he can't even medically trust himself to tell him which medication is which so that he doesn't take the painkillers from tomorrow's dose

when he's feeling sick. Shen Jiu's presence, even if he doesn't have an ache in his muscles to accentuate his bitterness, burns like a reminder that if it weren't for Luo Binghe, he *would still be suffering right now.* And Shen Jiu *would allow it.*

“Believe it or not, I am a fully functioning adult,” Shen Yuan says with all the firmness in his voice. “I know how to make my own decisions, and I know how to take responsibility for them. I have a son, and I am doing what I feel is necessary for his happiness. I am not thinking about myself; I am thinking *about him.* Chengle is my priority, and by putting him first, it doesn’t matter what I want, what you want, or what is right for my own comfort as long as it is what he needs. And Chengle *needs* his biological father in his life because he needs *to feel* loved by him too; he *needs that love*. This is not about me, or my choices, or *what I want*. It’s about thinking like a father, it’s about choosing for my son, even over me. How could you possibly understand that? What do *you know* about being a father?”

Shen Jiu recoils with a gasp as if Shen Yuan had stab him, the paper bag crumpling in his hands with a crack. More than furious, Shen Yuan realizes that *he looks hurt.* The horror on his face replaces fury, and as abruptly as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown over him, the fire in Shen Jiu seems to go out completely.

The pain in his eyes fades behind a haughty, empty stare. Shen Yuan watches as Jiu-ge raises his hand, his face firm, waiting for the slap that never comes, ready to take it if he dares to give it.

Shen Jiu pulls his hand away before it can even hit him, lowering it as he clenches it into a trembling fist. His mouth curls into the most horrifying bitterness; not rage or fury, but a deep pain that Shen Yuan has no idea where it could be coming from. Shen Jiu says nothing as he pushes the paper bag full of medicine against his chest, nearly pushing him down with the force of his blow, and leaves. He barely picks up his shoes and doesn't even put them on before leaving with a slam of the door that could have made the walls shake.

Shen Yuan stares at the bag of medicine on his chest and lets out a weak exhalation. What a way to start the morning.

“And that was my brother,” Shen Yuan says to Luo Binghe, as he returns to the kitchen with the medicine in his hands. He exhales. At least he has his pillbox written down by color and shape, which pills he should take.

Luo Binghe looks at him with a very strange expression. His hands are clenched into white fists on the counter.

“Yuan-ge must remind this Lord never to anger him,” he mentions. And when Shen Yuan makes a small questioning sound, Luo Binghe has a rare smile on his face as he says, “Ah, Yuan-ge may not have a sword, but his words can be as sharp as one.”

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Exaggerated.

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Shen Jiu doesn’t send any messages, and Shen Yuan doesn’t send any back. Shen Yuan organizes his pills in the pillbox by size and color just as Shen Jiu had organized them, and puts the bag of the rest of his medications at the back of the bathroom cabinet with the help of a chair, out of Chengle’s reach. He is a curious child, after all, and doesn’t want to leave anything within his reach that could potentially harm him.

During that day, he and Chengle play: they build a new floor for the tiger house, eat new food made by Luo Binghe, and when the cleaning-Ayi arrives, Shen Yuan pushes Chengle and Luo Binghe into the bedroom and puts a movie on the computer, leaving her to clean to her heart’s content.

He also apologizes when she returns at least ten Lego pieces of different sizes scattered under different furniture and one that almost broke her vacuum cleaner.

The one who does send him a message is Yue Qi.

It’s clear he’s worried; he asks as subtly as he can if something’s up, which Shen Yuan explains as best he can, given Yue Qi’s strong tendency to clearly favor his brother in everything, even when he’s wrong. Yue Qi isn’t someone Shen Yuan likes to pick fights with, anyway. It’s not that he’s intimidating, it’s just that, well. Shen Yuan finds it hard to feel good about himself when Yue Qi is disappointed in him.

Yue Qi agrees to talk to Shen Jiu but also insists that Shen Yuan *should* apologize for his words, as after all, his Jiu-ge had good intentions even if his approach wasn’t successful, and that they both know that their tempers tend to flare and clash. Implying that he’s clearly taking Shen Jiu’s side, Shen Yuan expects it, so he writes a simple and terse ‘I’m sorry’ on Shen Jiu’s chat just to get the issue off his chest, locks his phone, and ignores it for the rest of the afternoon.

To calm the mood, Shen Yuan plays several consecutive Christmas specials. Chengle likes them a lot, and after the first one, Luo Binghe stops looking at everything with such distaste. Shen Yuan supposes there are some things about technology that still stress him out, even after the explanation of how fictional it all is, like theaters. It's only after dinner—another exquisite meal by Luo Binghe, even with Shen Yuan's limited eating—that Shen Yuan checks his phone.

There's no response from Jiu-ge. Not that Shen Yuan was expecting one, anyway.

There had been a light snowfall all day, but according to the forecast, it won't snow or be windy the next day. Shen Yuan figures he could take advantage of this and get Chengle out of the apartment for a bit: it's true that the child is fascinated by his new toys and books, but he's also an enthusiastic and hyperactive little boy, and Just Dance is never enough, so going out for a run and playing in the snow wouldn't be a bad idea. Shen Yuan's body has been cooperative: he hasn't even needed his cane with the enormously lax relief in his muscles, even if at times he can feel a strange tug behind his joints, like the subtle discomfort that, compared to his familiar pain, isn't even something to take into account.

Maybe he can go outside and take his child out into the snow to play for a while. For once, the idea seems exceptionally good.

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When Shen Yuan wakes up, fully prepared to take advantage of his body's normal behavior in the face of winter for the first time in his life, he assumes he's simply jinxed himself by making plans. He gets out of bed with a stumble that nearly knocks his face first onto the floor.

There's no real pain, but as he's putting on his socks, he struggles a bit with stretching the elastic around his legs, noticing that he's probably retaining fluid, perhaps from adjusting to his new medication? His ankles look swollen, his joints are a little stiff compared to the day before, but even when he stretches his feet in various directions, reminding himself of the nurse's stretches, he doesn't feel *much* pain. There's something subtle there, in the background, the tension a little stiffer. But there's no actual pain.

Shen Yuan sighs. He bundles up a bit more than he should, assuming it's just the humidity. Maybe going out into the snow isn't such a good idea after all.

Luo Binghe cooks enough for breakfast and lunch and then makes his excuses to leave, insisting that he will be back before nightfall. Shen Yuan doesn't mind too much – he's fully aware that Luo Binghe still has to actively continue fulfilling his duties as Demon Emperor, husband, and, he hopes, *father* to his other children. Besides, it's a chance to find out if Liu Mingyan or Sha Hualing, or even Mu Qingfang, has answered any of his letters upon his return.

Besides, Shen Yuan has been seeing him a little more easily exhausted, his mood slightly more ambivalent and irritated. He figures it's better to take all the pressure off Xin Mo by papapaed one of his many, *many* wives than collecting a random human in his building. He has no idea how Shen Yuan could explain to some random human woman that Luo Binghe would bring into his apartment that she now must share her life with three hundred-something other women in a palace, and *all* their children. God, what a drama.

Luo Binghe leaves after saying goodbye to Chengle. Chengle is more sulking about the fact that his father *has* more important things to do than the fact that he's leaving, which Shen Yuan assumes is... a thing. They've barely spoken or played together, they haven't eaten at the same table since that first breakfast with Mobei Jun, and while Shen Yuan has tried to be a go-between for the two of them, their one-on-one interactions are so rare that it hurts right above his heart.

He doesn't want to force it, either. If Chengle isn't ready for it and Luo Binghe doesn't know a suitable way to approach him yet, he'll simply be helpful if either of them requests it, but he won't interfere other than to ensure Chengle's safety. Shen Yuan is fairly certain that's a good way to go about it.

Shen Yuan resigns himself to the fact that his joints simply chose to be tense for the day, and that they can curl up on the couch reading fairytales, playing with the Legos and with the Chengle’s tigers for the rest of the afternoon.

“Is Yuan-ge feeling bad?” Chengle asks sometime in the afternoon. His small eyebrows are furrowed, and Shen Yuan sighs, gently pinching the sweet cheek between his fingers. Ah,

those days when the child would try to bite him every time he did that. Now, like a puppy yearning for affection, he slumps against his hand, seeking more cuddles.

“Just tired,” Shen Yuan explains. It’s not that he’s sleepy or something like that. It’s more like… a feeling of fatigue. An exhaustion he can’t quite explain. “Don’t worry, baby.”

“But I worry,” Chengle complains, pouting slightly. “I don’t want to see Yuan-ge sick again. Those tubes are scary.”

Shen Yuan sighs, hugging him. He internally curses Jiu-ge a little for bringing him for a visit when he was still carrying some tubes that he couldn't get rid of that first day.

“I know, baby. I know. I’m sorry.” he exhales, gasping for air for a long moment, before placing a soft kiss on the top of his head. “Maybe I just need a little sugar. How about you get us both some Jell-O?”

Luo Chengle looks a little reluctant, pouting, but he's actually a kid with a sweet tooth, so Shen Yuan just has to tell him he can have the cherry one before the kid runs into the kitchen and comes back with jellies for both of them and spoons.

Shen Yuan discovers that, in fact, he's not lacking sugar. He's still as exhausted as if it were after midnight, and it's not even late afternoon. He feels almost numb, drowsy, and it's a huge effort to stay awake.

It doesn't improve at all when Luo Binghe returns. Shen Yuan has no idea how, but Luo Binghe has learned to reposition his portals so that he can take off his shoes at the entrance as he passes by without stepping on the clean floor, which is quite funny in retrospect.

Luo Binghe brings letters for Shen Yuan, candies from the Demon Realm that look like lumps of carbon stone that actually taste like sugar and apples that Sha Hualing sends to Chengle, a letter for Chengle from his An-ge (with what appear to be scribbles and poor attempts at a letter of her little hand from Shao-mei), and a few other items. Almost all of them, Shen Yuan notes, with curious and lazy eyes from where he has barely been able to move due to the strange sensation in his joints, are multiple small objects that once belonged to Luo Chengle in the palace: wooden swords, card decks with funny drawings, dices, pieces from some childhood game carved from something Shen Yuan hopes isn't bone.

The only gift among all the things that makes Luo Chengle cry his eyes out is a tale written by his mother.

“Mom always told it to me before I went to sleep,” the boy murmurs in a very low voice, as he finishes crying in Shen Yuan’s arms. It’s a tiny book, bound with hand-stitched binding and soft parchment beneath his fingers. Each page features ink drawings done with such care and attention that Shen Yuan can see the love in every ink stroke. “I liked it a lot.”

Luo Binghe stands there, empty-handed and with confused eyes. At this point, Shen Yuan will have to get him a specific wardrobe for the large quantities of robes he simply replaces when he arrives from his own world and forgets to bring back. He has more layers of Luo Binghe's robes than he has summer pajamas.

Shen Yuan silently signs for him to sit down. Luo Binghe does so, even though every part of his body is tense, as if he's ready to attack or run, or both.

“You miss her a lot, don’t you?” Shen Yuan hums. Chengle sniffs, nodding his little head. “I know, sweetie. You know you can visit her whenever you want, right?”

“No!” Chengle protests, his tearful little voice cracking a little at the edges. “I don’t want to. I don’t want to, I don’t want to. She has the baby now. She doesn’t love me. I don’t want her. I don’t want to see her if she doesn’t love me.”

“She loves you,” Luo Binghe says, *surprisingly*. Chengle flinches as if stabbed, turning in Shen Yuan’s arms to look at Luo Binghe with wide, accusing eyes. “Your mother noticed you were gone the first night you didn’t come to sleep. She… *insisted* something had happened to you. She said that every night you went to say goodnight to her, even if she couldn’t answer you. And when you didn’t come that first night, she knew something was wrong.”

Shen Yuan pulls Chengle into a tighter hug as the boy begins to sob again. His own arms tremble in his grasp.

“I didn’t want to make Mom sad,” the boy sniffles, hiccuping. “I didn’t want to. I just wanted to… I didn’t *like the palace*,” he complains, babbling. “If Father Emperor is mean and Mom only loves the baby, who loves Chengle?”

It takes more than an hour to calm him down. Shen Yuan carries him in his arms, and no amount of sugar, cuddles, or kisses help him stop crying. When Chengle falls asleep, it's crying, exhausted, in Shen Yuan's arms, curled up like a baby, even with the edge of his thumb in his mouth.

“I… apologize,” Luo Binghe says a moment later. His voice sounds almost fragile over the silence. “This Lord… I didn’t expect… I didn’t think he would react so badly.”

“He misses his mother very much,” Shen Yuan explains, brushing his hair with his fingers. His sweet boy hiccups in his sleep, and small salty tears continue to fall down his face. “In the palace, he only knew love from his mother. I don’t doubt that Mobei Jun and Sha Hualing, or even his brothers, treated him well and loved him; it’s true that they all seem worried.” Shen Yuan points to the pile of gifts and letters for Chengle. “But Chengle is a sensitive child. He has a sweet heart, and he sorely missed that gentle, tender love—the love that only his mother gave him. He’s sorely missed it all this time.”

Luo Binghe bows his head. His hair falls loose, a dark curtain shadowing his face. He doesn't look angry, actually. He looks… sad.

Ah. Speaking of missing mothers, Shen Yuan guesses that Luo Binghe has a lot of firsthand knowledge on the subject that he probably doesn't want to talk about.

“He is fragile, for someone so strong,” Luo Binghe says after a long moment of silence. Unlike other times, there’s something about the way he says it that doesn’t immediately make Shen Yuan defensive. “This Lord cannot say that Chengle doesn’t know pain, for he seems familiar with it in the palace thanks to this Emperor’s ineptitude in ensuring that all his

children are safe and equal. However, his heart has not turned cruel, and his spirit remains kind. Even as fragile as he is in the face of pain, Chengle is strong enough not to be corrupted by it."

Shen Yuan sighs. His little boy hiccups in his sleep, curled up like a sweet baby in his arms, and Shen Yuan can't even imagine him as more than one. A tender little boy with a messy tangle of curls comes to mind, a terrified child drifting from nightmare to nightmare, hiding in Shen Yuan's arms for protection.

"No child should be forced to be strong," Shen Yuan says, despite everything. He rocks the sleeping Chengle in his arms, rubbing his back. He feels his hands tremble even when he holds them still, the way his little boy seems to shrink further into his embrace even in his dreams. "Not when the alternative is being loved."

Luo Binghe doesn't reply. Shen Yuan doesn't expect one from him either. He continues to rock the sleeping child in his arms until he begins to feel an unpleasant tingling in his legs.

"Allow me," Luo Binghe says as discomfort is obviously visible on Shen Yuan's face, and he extends his arms towards him.

For some reason, when Shen Yuan hands him over and lets the sleeping child curl up in his arms, seeking warmth and comfort in his dreams, there's something—a distant pressure, a sensation that eases like untying a tight knot. Luo Binghe needs no instructions to pick him up, shifting him in his arms as if he knows just the right way, with just the right amount of movement so as not to disturb his son's sleep, without hesitation for a second.

He's a father, Shen Yuan *knows*. At some point in his life, he must have held the babies his wives gave birth to, cared for them, played with them, *loved them.*

But Shen Yuan has no idea when Luo Binghe last did before he starts doing it again, now, with an expression so tense that he even seems to be going through physical pain as he carefully holds the little one in his arms and carries him to the bed.

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Luo Binghe delivers dinner to the two of them in bed, and unlike all the times Shen Yuan had to eat in bed in the past, he doesn't feel sick or weak when he does. It's not him he has to take care of, but his baby, who needs a safe place, rich comfort food, cuddles, and all the pampering he can get to feel better.

Chengle curls up surrounded by tigers after dinner and then, carefully and after asking if he would like to – and getting a small, weak affirmative, Luo Binghe brings the desk chair to the bedside and reads in a low, gentle voice the tale of Mingyan.

And Chengle clutches two of his different tigers, along with Shen Yuan's sleeve, as if he physically had to hold onto something to keep from crying again. But it's true: he's a strong, brave, and fragile-hearted boy, because even if he doesn't cry again until the end of the story, he sheds only two tears.

“I miss Mom,” he whispers in a low voice as he falls asleep. Shen Yuan kisses his forehead, brushing his hair with his fingers. “I don’t like the baby. But I want a hug.”

Chengle falls asleep shortly after that, with the soft fragility of a wish made upon the stars painted with crystalline tears on his closed eyelashes. Shen Yuan sighs.

“Can you give him a nice dream?” Shen Yuan asks. Luo Binghe flinches only slightly when he speaks, lost in his own thoughts, Shen Yuan guesses. “He deserves a hug from his mom.”

“He deserves it,” Luo Binghe says, nodding. “He’ll get it.”

Shen Yuan stays holding Chengle carefully, letting him sleep between a hug, stuffed animals and hoping that he has the best dreams to take refuge that night.

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Morning arrives with a strange feeling all over his body. He's trembling, his muscles tense and stiff. It feels almost like a cold, and Shen Yuan pulls his arm to feel his forehead, not at all surprised to find it boiling. Simply feeling it against his throat, he finds clearly swollen glands, although swallowing doesn't hurt beyond the general discomfort. Wow. In the end, he supposes, it was to be *expected*.

What's unexpected, he realizes, is when he tries to get out of bed and doesn't even have the strength to move his legs. It's as if they're numb; he can clearly tilt them, move his toes, but when he tries to force himself out of bed, just sitting down causes them to shake almost spasmodically.

He doesn't feel pain. He doesn't feel pain *at all.*

There's no pain in his throat, as is usual when he's suffering from a cold or something; the nagging sensation in his muscles, between his lungs, in his back, is a shadow of what would be a sharp, residual pain that could burn him another time. Notify him. *Warn him.*

He feels no pain as he digs his fingers into the swollen muscles, his heart bubbling with panic with each increasingly erratic beat. He digs his fingers so hard that the skin swells, paling and reddening at the sides, and he collapses back onto the bed, a wordless laugh bursting from a throat too swollen to make a sound.

Luo Binghe hadn't *cured* the inflammation in his muscles. He hadn't done some xianxia healing to relax him and help him get better like Shen Yuan had believed. Of course, he had focused on what Shen Yuan had explained to him, and what else did he know, after all? In a world of cultivators, what kind of medical knowledge is necessary other than how to heal wounds and that the fucking Heavenly Pillar is the cure for all other illness or curses?

Luo Binghe hadn't *healed him*. He had, in some way Shen Yuan didn't even fully understand, nullified his own fucking *perception of pain*. The pain had been the problem; Shen Yuan had told Luo Binghe. The pain had been what Luo Binghe literally attacked.

And as much as he wants to feel angry about the situation he's in now, the truth is that Shen Yuan can only feel pathetically humiliated and ashamed, and most of all, furious with himself for having stupid hopes.

Chapter End Notes

SY: *says the most hurtful things in an argument with his own brother, defending his decision to keep LBG around*
LBG: ...I'm having /feelings/ right now

...and I think now a question I AVOIDED ANSWERING BECAUSE KSFKSDFN IS TOO SPOILER-INDUCED is answered. I'M SORRY. WHO SAID BINGGE KNOWS HOW TO HEAL WITH ANYTHING OTHER THAN HIS HEAVENLY PILLAR? NO ONE, PROBABLY. HE ONLY HAS ONE (1) MAGIC ITEM THAT HEALS THAT ISN'T HIS BLOOD, AND IT'S NOT HIS QI. I'M SORRY, BABE, YOU HAD GOOD INTENTIONS, BUT IT JUST DOESN'T WORK THAT WAY

Do you think the argument between the Shen bros was bad? My sister literally made me delete the sentence after "What do you know about being a father?" Because Shen Yuan, the blind oblivious fool, also said "You won't be a father for a long time to know what decisions need to be made." Yeah. My sister physically threatened me to remove that sentence. Thanks her :P
Also, my sister said: lol, Jiu-ge got a critical failure when having an argument with his Yuan-di

If you burst into tears at *that* line from Chengle, congratulations, me too. It hit me harder than a Lego tower when I was editing the chapter and literally HURT me. I suffered physical damage

DAMN, I HAVE VERY FEW HOURS OF SLEEP ON ME, BUT I SWEAR IT'S NOT FROM WRITING. I EVEN WENT TO BED EARLY. Except I accidentally left the window open and woke up sick like 3 hours later from the fucking pollen. I wouldn't survive a day in PIDW, guys. I'm cannon fodder, and my plot wouldn't last even three paragraphs :B
THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING. I HOPE YOU REALLY LIKED THE CHAPTER. Okay, WELL, you know!!! kudo-comment-interactions, and really, THANK YOU SO MUCH for joining me on this crazy journey all those days. Yea, I heard you. No need to come in a mob dragging me to sleep and hydrate. I love you absolutely, all of you now are my best friends and I love you with my heart. I'm going to take tomorrow to get a lot of sleep and catch up on my Duolingo lessons :P
I'M MISSING YOU ALREADY!! SEE YOU SOON *hugs*

Chapter 17: Tenth day out - two days before Christmas

Chapter Notes

GUESS WHO'S BACK
Thank you so much for your well wishes. I went to the doctor, filled up on antihistamines, got some new tea blends, slept a lot, did some skincare, and made progress with Natlan's exploration I'd put on hold. I hope this is proof enough that I did take a little break, and put down your torches. Thank you so much for all your love and concern as always :P

AH, WE HAVE FANART!! YOU CAN SEE THEM HERE, HERE AND HERE. I'M CRYING. YOU ARE SO BEAUTIFUL, THANK YOU SO MUCH!!!!

Chapter warnings: Shen Yuan's bad health, talk about you-know-what-happened-last-summer (aka the destruction of the Qing Jing Sect)

Enjoy the chapter! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Shen Yuan wakes up for the second time it's because Luo Binghe has returned with the best medical option that doesn't amount to calling the emergency services; despite how much he's sure he *needs* a trained doctor right now, he's not stupid either: explaining to a modern doctor why he wasn't in any pain would probably amount to at least five or six clinical studies that wouldn't help since, well, it's not like he can talk about xianxia things without being immediately referred to the psychiatric ward.

The man Luo Binghe brings is pale, with deep dark circles under his eyes and a genuinely haggard appearance, surrounded by a deep herbal scent. Cruelly, Shen Yuan thinks, his hair is shabbily cut for the xianxia era into a shot, messy haircut, but neither his appearance nor his mismatched robes make his hands any less skillful when, with a glance, he rummages through his sleeves for a tonic to mix with the hot water Luo Binghe is already bringing.

Luo Binghe introduces him as Mu Qingfang.

“How is Chengle?” is the first thing he asks, when his throat clears enough for him to speak properly. It’s still difficult to swallow, but the xianxia medicine, besides being floral in all its indications, *seems* to have a fairly immediate warming effect against his throat, even a little spicy, clearing his airways. “I tried to explain, but he was scared. Did he…?”

“Mobei Jun is looking after him. He’s having breakfast now,” Luo Binghe explains quickly. There’s a firm tension in his shoulders, a gaze that seems to waver between Shen Yuan, who hasn’t been able to get up yet, Mu Qingfang, who looks as haggard as death, and the door. “He wants… you to be well. *He* demanded me that you be well.”

“I will be,” Shen Yuan says resolutely. Then, sighing, he confronts directly at the other elephant in the room: “My name is Shen Yuan, and I deeply apologize to Doctor Mu. When I told that enormous, big dumb emperor that I urgently needed a doctor and that he *not* to touch me for the moment, I didn’t mean him to kidnap one *either*. My apologies.”

And Shen Yuan gives Luo Binghe a hard look; he's not angry with him, though, just… frustrated. The look seems to speak for itself, because Luo Binghe sighs, bowing his head slightly. He's still tense even as he walks out the door, but at least he doesn't slam the door on his way out, which *is* a good thing.

“The important thing now is for Shen Gongzi to improve his health,” says Mu Qingfang. It’s a visit to the doctor unlike any Shen Yuan has experienced before: Mu Qingfang checks his pulse, his wrists, presses his fingers against specific points on his body; the pain stings, at times, as a different qi seems to wander and press, testing his nerves. Shen Yuan, despite everything, *is relieved.* He hates feeling pain, but not feeling it at all when he should be is a horror story. “This doctor apologizes if his care is inaccurate. Despite his experience, this doctor has more experience working with people with active spiritual veins.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Shen Yuan says, sighing. He wants to be furious with Luo Binghe, really, he wants to blame him and *rage*, but the truth is, he doesn’t have the energy for that either. Even if he is the Protagonist of his world, even with his enormous brain and abilities, it’s true that if Mu Qingfang isn’t used to working with people without spiritual veins, it’s true that Luo Binghe isn’t either. Shen Yuan highly doubts that Luo Binghe acted maliciously behind his actions, even if a week ago he would have said just the opposite.

“This doctor must ask. What kind of condition is causing Shen Gongzi’s preexisting illness?” Mu Qingfang asks. There’s no judgment in his voice, not even any morbid curiosity, just the typical clinical calm.

Shen Yuan sighs, wearily; he doesn't offer any diagnoses, simply because he doesn't think Mu Qingfang can really understand them. He focuses on explaining the basics:

“My own body wants me dead,” he explains. Mu Qingfang doesn’t flinch as Shen Yuan might have expected, but the truth is, what hasn’t this man seen by now? “Doctor Mu, are you familiar with the immune system?”

A brief general explanation later, Shen Yuan continues: “Mine, instead of protecting me as it should, attacks me. Mostly my muscles, although there was a time when it tried to mess with my skin and organs, but that was due to poor medication. Which mostly generates very painful inflammation, weakness, stiffness, fever in the worst cases. I've even been unable to eat or breathe normally,” and he palpates the edges of his neck. The inflammation hasn't gone down much, but the fact is that even speaking feels less difficult now. “It behaves differently from patient to patient. The truth is, I'm lucky. It could be worse, or I might not have the money or the support to make dealing with this a thousand times worse.”

Mu Qingfang nods. His examination moves on to more common movements; some Shen Yuan already recognizes well: Mu Qingfang palpates his swollen glands, places a hand on his back, follows the rhythm of his breathing like a vague imitation of a stethoscope.

“Does Shen Gongzi know what Junshang did?” Mu Qingfang asks. Shen Yuan shakes his head.

“I don’t know. My knowledge of qi is… theoretical, abstract, and honestly, I didn’t even know it was a real thing until Chengle appears here,” he mumbles. He forces himself to smile and not look honestly scared. “I assume what he did is something… *well*. I don’t know. I know the pain is there, or *should* be, but I can’t feel it. And honestly,” he grimaces, exhausted, “it’s not that I think *he can’t* fix it. It’s just… I’d rather someone who *knows* exactly what they’re doing help me with it.”

He's absolutely certain that Luo Binghe, whether in the other room or behind the door, is listening intently. He feels a little sorry for him, and thinks the fact that he's feeling bad and not furious is a big change; a week ago, he would have believed it was all on purpose: that Luo Binghe had tried to put him in such great danger, breaking him down without him realizing it.

Now, however. Well. He doesn't believe Luo Binghe has *such bad* intentions, at least not toward him. Even if the way they got to know each other was disastrous, he *almost* believes it makes sense. He's no less upset about his stay in the hospital, nor less furious with him for his terrible parenting skills, but it doesn't mean Shen Yuan expects a direct attack from him.

“That’s understandable,” Mu Qingfang hums. His hand hovers over his wrist, examining his pulse. Shen Yuan doesn’t feel invasive, much less so when the sparks of cold qi seem to pierce deep, even through flesh or skin, something that almost makes his skin crawl and chills. “The positive thing is that I can detect and remove the blockage created by Luo-… by Junshang.”

The way Mu Qingfang remains silent makes Shen Yuan want to bury his face in the pillow and scream until he loses his voice.

“The negative is that it’s going to hurt,” Shen Yuan adds.

Mu Qingfang nods.

“I can remove it in a moment, if that’s what Shen Gongzi wishes,” Mu Qingfang explains simply. More qi flows through, a cold sensation *very* different from that of Luo Binghe or Chengle, and Shen Yuan grimaces as he feels it brush against… wherever the blockage is. He feels it in his chest, but also throughout his body, like a low-voltage electrical spark, a shadow of the pain to come. “It’s a simple qi blockade. It’s a basic spell that, under different circumstances, would help a cultivator deal with pain while their body heals during a battle. Used on cultivators, it’s not worth the trouble. However, given Shen Gongzi’s mortal state, his inactive spiritual veins, and his preexisting medical complications *complicating* the healing process…”

Shen Yuan understands. His body doesn't feel the pain, but instead of being quick enough to heal from it, he simply acts irresponsibly as a result of not feeling it.

It's going to be a fucking mess.

“Please remove it,” he murmurs. It pains him to say it, but not for a physical reason.

Mu Qingfang nods.

“When Shen Gongzi is ready.”

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“Yuan-ge, Yuan-ge!” Chengle jumps to hug him as soon as he leaves the room. Shen Yuan clutches his cane so tightly that it hurts his hands, making a good excuse for tears in his eyes. “Yuan-ge! Yuan-ge scared Chengle so much! Is Yuan-ge feeling very-very bad? Should we call a nurse and Uncle Ai-plein again? Uncle Ai-plein can make apple bunnies for Yuan-ge!”

“I’ll be better now, baby,” Shen Yuan whispers. He can barely lean down to pat his little head, even though he knows every fucking word out of his mouth is a ridiculous lie. Better. *Ha*. As if even the stupid xianxia fantasy would allow him to be better. What a fucking trash. “The nurse is on vacations. But we can bother your Uncle Airplane if you want to play with him later. I’m going to be in sofa and a bed a lot today.”

Chengle pouts. His sweet little eyes sparkle, and he tries to climb up and hug him.

It's Mu Qingfang who places his hand on the boy's shoulder. Immediately after, and without even Shen Yuan realizing where the hell he appeared from, Luo Binghe has his hand wrapped around Mu Qingfang's wrist, and seems to be squeezing him *tightly.*

“I understand that the Imperial Prince wants to hug Shen Gongzi. However, Shen Gongzi is in a lot of pain right now,” Mu Qingfang says, his voice flat. He doesn’t let on that the obvious damage Luo Binghe’s hand is doing by squeezing his wrist is evident, even as the color of his hand is visibly reddening by the second. “It would be appropriate for Shen Gongzi to rest and not to overexert himself, like carrying a child, even if it’s just a hug.”

Luo Chengle backs away, his eyes wide and frightened. Shen Yuan has to grit his teeth to keep from lashing out with his cane.

“I’m *fine,*” he says, with such determination that his voice borders on anger. “Luo Binghe, let him go.”

Luo Binghe lets go of Mu Qingfang's hand. He hides both hands behind his back, facing away. Shen Yuan exhales a deep breath, trying to restrain himself from starting to swear.

“I can hug my son,” Shen Yuan says to Mu Qingfang, praying that his voice doesn’t come out with as much venom as he thinks, “although Doctor Mu’s medical concern is appreciated.”

Then he moves forward as smoothly as possible to collapse on the sofa, patting the spot next to him. Chengle runs quickly, and although he hesitates before jumping into the space next to him, he finally does so and takes refuge in his arms.

“I didn’t know I was hurting Yuan-ge,” Chengle stammers in his embrace. His voice is low, a sad whisper. “I don’t like it when Yuan-ge hurts.”

“It always hurts,” Shen Yuan says, with a sad sigh. “Sometimes more, sometimes less. But my baby doesn’t have to worry, okay?”

“The medical recommendation from now on,” Mu Qingfang continues, as if Shen Yuan’s interruption to sit and hug his son hadn’t happened, “is *rest*. If Shen Gongzi were a cultivator, it would be appropriate for him to circulate qi through the affected areas, alleviating the damage and inflammation. While this doctor is unfamiliar with the medical treatments available in this… place,” Shen Yuan can’t help but notice Mu Qingfang’s curious expression, taking in everything from the turned-off flat-screen television, the furniture, the digital clock, the video game console on the table under the television, even the electric light above their heads. “A proper treatment for this type of ailment is always adequate rest, stretching, and elongation. This doctor assumes that Shen Gongzi has his own medications, however, upon request, he would be willing to provide tinctures and poultices that might be helpful.”

“He’ll accept them,” Luo Binghe says, not even looking at Shen Yuan to acknowledge the acidic glare he gives him. Seriously, just decide for him? It’s not that Shen Yuan would refuse, but just to be contrary, he’s willing to do so. Who is he supposed to be making decisions *about his health?* “Doctor Mu’s services will be duly paid for.”

“Indeed,” Shen Yuan shakes his head. “Doctor Mu treated *me*. I’m the one who should be paying him, and I know something that Doctor Mu might like more than money or anything else *you* could give him,” Shen Yuan says. Mu Qingfang’s gaze on him is… strange. Shen Yuan supposes he should expect a suspicious, somewhat hostile look: after all, Luo Binghe seems to have literally kidnapped him against his will and brought him through a portal, perhaps even threatening his life in the process. He had literally been unconscious when Mu Qingfang arrived at the apartment as if to check what had happened.

Yet Mu Qingfang just stares at him with a strange, deep, and utter curiosity. He seems ready to ask a thousand questions, and Shen Yuan has no idea how many of them he can answer.

With one last hug around Luo Chengle, he kisses his forehead and makes the boy look up at him, his eyes large, naive, and tender. “Chengle, do you want to do your Yuan-ge a favor?”

“Yes!” Luo Chengle says, his expression radiant. His smile is light, just the beginning of one, and Shen Yuan can only feel the warmth washing over him.

“Do you want to teach Doctor Mu how to use the computer?”

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At first, Luo Binghe supervises them. Shen Yuan is sure it can’t be entirely comfortable for Mu Qingfang, but once Luo Chengle teaches him the same basics Shen Yuan had taught him – and puts the Chinese keyboard on screen, which is much easier to understand than a typical QWERTY keyboard – Mu Qingfang starts doing random searches to see how much knowledge he can find in that *cloud library* and… well.

Luo Binghe pulls Luo Chengle out of the room as Mu Qingfang starts finding videos of different types of surgeries. Shen Yuan greets the boy, happy to have been useful to an adult,

though still somewhat scared as he climbs onto the sofa where Shen Yuan is.

“Doctor Mu is weird,” Chengle says, snuggling gently against Shen Yuan. And then, softly, he whispers, “Doctor Mu is afraid of Father Emperor.”

“Wow, is that so?” Shen Yuan asks, even though he already knows the answer. Luo Chengle nods his little head, his eyes curious. “Why does my child think that?”

“He looks very scared!” says Chengle, in a loud whisper. The boy, of course, doesn’t even care that his father is standing off to the side. Shen Yuan actively tries to ignore him: if Luo Binghe has been giving him the silent treatment, barely speaking to him and not looking his way, Shen Yuan may do exactly the same. “He goes *‘oop!’* whenever Father the Emperor comes near. Scared! And, and. He’s tense! Like servants when Father Emperor walks in! Why is Doctor Mu afraid of him? He doesn’t live in the palace. And he’s a doctor! Should a doctor be afraid? And of Father Emperor?”

Shen Yuan hums, weighing it up. Then he gently pats Chengle's head.

“Isn’t that something my sweet boy should ask his father?”

Luo Chengle pouts. Still, his brave little boy takes a deep breath and turns to stare at Luo Binghe, who is standing to the side. Shen Yuan sees the rigid tension in his shoulders, and his loose hair almost completely covers his profile.

“Father Emperor,” Chengle says, his voice much firmer than Shen Yuan would have expected. That’s good, he thinks, smiling almost involuntarily. “Is Doctor Mu afraid of you?”

Luo Binghe remains like a statue, silent and motionless, for a long moment. Then he nods.

“Why?” Chengle asks again. His voice is still firm, though a little lower this time.

Luo Binghe takes a deep breath. Shen Yuan observes the way that, even with a movement as simple as that, almost his entire body reacts. His shoulders tense further, his breath seeming to linger in his lungs for a long moment before he exhales it slowly, almost looking as if he's deflating in place like a sad balloon.

“This Emperor destroyed Doctor Mu’s sect,” Luo Binghe explains in a strange tone of voice. He doesn’t sound sorry at all, and Shen Yuan doesn’t expect him to be either. However, he doesn’t sound *particularly* proud either. “Where he taught his disciples, where his martial brothers lived. Doctor Mu survived only because this Lord was benevolent, and since he had always kept to himself, it was on the sidelines that he was kept while everyone else perished. Doctor Mu didn’t help this Lord when he needed him, so he couldn’t help his disciples, martial nephews, or sect brothers when they needed him.”

Luo Chengle falls silent. Shen Yuan is ready to roll his eyes, but he feels too fatigued to even catch a pillow to scream into.

“That’s *mean*,” Luo Chengle says softly. “Are all of Doctor Mu’s friends dead? And his students?”

This time, Luo Binghe takes a little longer to answer. His only response is a weak “Yes,” after almost half a full minute of silence.

“I don’t like it,” Luo Chengle says, and he retreats so quickly into Shen Yuan’s arms that it’s almost painful. “I’d be scared too.”

Luo Binghe tenses. A moment later, too quickly to even notice if he's reacted in any other way, he moves and leaves. His steps aren't heavy, though his body language shows tension with every movement, and though Shen Yuan expects him to slam the kitchen door, it actually closes slowly behind him.

Shen Yuan sighs. He brushes Luo Chengle's hair with his fingers, weighing it carefully. On the one hand, he doesn't want to intervene: it's true that Luo Binghe's actions were brutal, and with his sword and his vengeance, he took innocent people with him only because they belonged to the wrong sect. What had Ku Xing's disciples, at the peak of asceticism, closer to monks than to the Protagonist's torturers, done? What had Wan Jian's apprentice blacksmiths done, more concerned with strengthening themselves physically to forge and create?

But there were also all the disciples of Bai Zhan, who even if they had been only children and teenagers, had broken Luo Binghe's bones more than once, leaving him to his fate. There were the disciples of Qian Cao, unable to use their medicine to heal him under threats from Shen Qingqiu that anyone who saw them healing the beast he had as a disciple would be forced to take his place under the whip. There were the disciples of Qiong Ding, who even though they were the main peak and the closest to Qing Jing, stood idly by without helping poor Lotus Binghe while the torture against him progressed.

“Mn, I’m not scared,” Shen Yuan hums. He kisses Luo Chengle’s forehead and strokes his cheek as the boy looks up at him with wide, surprised eyes. “I know your father is someone who can do many things that could be horrible. They don’t stop being horrible just because he did them, that’s true. But your father never does horrible things without a reason,” he says, though he sighs only a little in resignation, “…or without *believing* he has a reason.”

Luo Chengle pouts. Then, he tilts his head and asks, “So what he did was okay?”

Shen Yuan feels like he's treading on muddy waters. However, running away isn't an option. Backing out now, changing the subject, or saying the wrong thing could give Chengle the wrong idea. He hums, thinking about exactly how to respond.

“I can't say it was okay,” he finally says. “But I also can't say I wouldn't have done something similar.”

Luo Chengle lets out a clear gasp, staring at him with wide eyes.

“But Yuan-ge is the nicest!” Chengle says, looking at him with a puzzled expression. Then, his sweet little eyebrows furrow. His mouth curls into a pout. “Yuan-ge wouldn’t do something like that.”

Shen Yuan laughs a little.

“Mn, does Chengle remember his father’s words, about how Doctor Mu didn’t help him when he needed it?” he asks. Chengle nods. His mouth is still set in that grimace, a complaining little pout. He seems to be trying very hard to understand and not judge, which Shen Yuan thinks is wonderful. “Well, when your father was a little boy like you, he also needed adults to help him and take care of him. Just like I’m taking care of you. And no adults took care of him,” Shen Yuan continues. It’s a… terrible thing to have to say to a child, and a large part of Shen Yuan doesn’t want to tell him. Still, he supposes, it’s certainly a necessary conversation as long as it’s kept to… rather vague details.

Luo Chengle seems to think about it for a moment. Then, like the sweet, clever boy he is, he nods.

“So Father Emperor didn’t do wrong by causing harm?” he asks. There’s true, genuine, and profound confusion on his little face. Shen Yuan sighs deeply.

“*I think* he could have done things differently,” Shen Yuan murmurs, almost reluctantly. “However, your father’s heart was *hurt*. If no one was kind to him, how could he ever learn what it means to be kind?” Shen Yuan keeps holding Chengle the whole time.

On the one hand, he wants to give his child the best lessons possible. On the other hand, he don't feel like the right person to do it, or at least, *the one who* should be doing it.

“Your father acted the way he knew how, the only way his life had taught him. He was no crueler than they was when he was young,” he sighed deeply. Luo Chengle had curled up almost on top of him, still careful. His embrace was firm, but not tight. Shen Yuan still felt feverish, but he trusted that nothing in his body could make the child in his arms even slightly ill. “And even though they were… horrible things, your father was entitled to… compensation. The way he was treated was not fair, nor right.” Chengle snuggled deeper into his arms. Shen Yuan rubbed his back with gentle movements, letting the child lean against his beating heart, seeking comfort. “But what I said is also true, you know, my sweet boy?”

Luo Chengle makes a low, doubtful sound. Still hidden in his embrace, he asks, “Would Yuan-ge do such a mean thing? But Yuan-ge is *good*.”

“If anyone were ever to dare to do the same harm to you that was done to your father,” Shen Yuan says, and is surprised by the firmness of his voice, despite how soft he tries to make it, “I wouldn’t care what is or isn’t mean. My sweet boy is too young to understand, and I am so sorry for saying things that sound so confusing.”

Chengle shakes his head. His hands are small fists, barely clenched in Shen Yuan's clothes, as if he doesn't want to let go for a moment.

“Chengle understands. A little,” he says, his voice soft. “There are bad things that are done not because they’re *right* to do, but because… no knows how to do it any other way?” He hesitates. Shen Yuan smiles a little against his hair, his heart aching a little. “Yuan-ge, I don’t like it. Chengle wants to understand.”

Shen Yuan isn't entirely sure he can understand or explain, other than to simply let himself be carried away by the deep, profound warmth in his chest, the blind rage that burns within him

at the thought of anyone trying to harm his child. Luo Binghe had suffered *so much* that when he took revenge, it was fair to everyone. He returned and multiplied the treatment he was subjected to. But would anyone do even a tiny fraction of that harm to Chengle?

Oh, Shen Yuan *would go crazy.*

“Violence is never an appropriate response in this world, unlike the world you come from,” Shen Yuan says, a little more patiently, trying not to sound so drowned in thoughts and emotions that he can’t be clear. “I can’t measure here what would be right there. But I can only say that when your heart is very, very empty of things that might make you feel good, that’s all that’s left. So, we will fill that beautiful heart of yours with beautiful things, so that things that doesn't fell you good never all that’s left.”

Luo Chengle nods his little head. He lets himself be hugged for a while longer, leaving Shen Yuan with the silence of his own mind, the pain in every part of his body, and the dazed numbness that only a bad day can bring.

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It is in the afternoon –when Luo Binghe has already *deported* Mobei Jun and Mu Qingfang back to their world, and when Luo Binghe has already returned an hour later with a huge pile of things that Mu Qingfang himself probably got from the imperial storehouses, if Shen Yuan can carefully appreciate the expensive detail of all the carved wooden boxes– that Luo Binghe finally approaches him.

Luo Chengle is taking a bath. Shen Yuan has tied the boy's hair up in a high bun to keep it from getting wet; the pain has left him barely able to hold his bowl of soup, so he doesn't think he can muster the stamina to brush and dry his hair today.

That's why, when Luo Binghe literally *falls* to his knees in front of where Shen Yuan is still sitting on the sofa, Shen Yuan's first reaction is alarm.

“Hey, hey,” he reaches out, feeling for Luo Binghe with trembling hands. Luo Binghe doesn’t take his eyes off the ground, but he doesn’t look unfocused or on the verge of fainting. Maybe he’s just really exhausted? Well, *that makes* sense, that’s too many portals in one day… “Are you okay? How are you feeling? Do you need anything? Can I… do anything?” he stammers, hesitating toward the end. If *Luo Binghe,* of all people, was suddenly so weak that he could give in to weakness, what could Shen Yuan do for him?

“Even in this circumstance, Yuan-ge has the heart to care for this Lord,” Luo Binghe says, his voice low and hollow. Every word sounds strange, distant, and finally Luo Binghe looks up from the ground when Shen Yuan tugs at his face, testing whether the skin on his forehead or neck is hot. A deviation of qi causes fever, he’s learned, but Luo Binghe is completely fine…? “This one is unworthy.”

“Don’t joke,” Shen Yuan snorts. “What symptoms do you have? Do you need a-…?”

Luo Binghe ducks his head. Shen Yuan feels his pulse race, half in terror and half in panic. If Luo Binghe *really* has qi deviation, there’s *nothing* Shen Yuan can do. On the other hand, if

he *really does faint*, Shen Yuan is probably screwed too, because he'll have no idea how or what to do to help him, or even how to move him. He's not even sure he knows where Luo Binghe is keeping Xin Mo, or if he'll even be able to open a portal with it to ask for help!!

But Luo Binghe doesn't faint. Neither his mouth nor his nose bleeds, and when he bows, Shen Yuan has to remain in tense silence for the next ten seconds as he tries to process the image of the great and powerful Demon Emperor Luo Binghe in front of him, kneeling and forehead on the ground, in complete reverence.

"*Luo Binghe*?" doubt.

"This one is unworthy," Luo Binghe repeats, his voice muffled from the ground. "Even with the power he's forged, despite all his triumphs, this Lord does nothing but fail. All the time, with everyone. Yuan-ge should…"

"Hey," Shen Yuan interrupts. No, he definitely *won't* hear what weird, silly things Luo Binghe has in his head. What's that, for God's sake. What the *hell*. "No, *no*. Get up. What are you doing?"

Luo Binghe doesn't move. His breathing is shallow and tense. He seems to have a chill.

"Apologizing properly," Luo Binghe says, still not looking at him, still in that humiliating position. "This one is unworthy. Yuan-ge can—"

"No," Shen Yuan says, as quickly as he can. Shen Yuan can't even handle his own body enough to deal with that today, thanks but no thanks. "Oh my God, just sit down, what's wrong with you, really?"

Finally, Luo Binghe obeys. He's still kneeling on the ground, and when he sits up, Shen Yuan can see that he clearly looks miserable: his black eyes are red-rimmed and bloodshot. Aside from that, the pallor of his face is worrying, but there's nothing to prove that he was struck by some unreasonable curse or anything like that.

His eyes are sad. Exhausted.

Shen Yuan rubs his forehead, shaking his head.

"You don't have to apologize," he says, pointing at himself. "I'm not mad at you. *This* is who *I am*, and this is what happens. I'll be okay."

"Yuan-ge *should* be furious with this Lord," Luo Binghe chimes in, his expression almost offended. "This Lord was careless, followed by his arrogance. He thought everything would work out just because this one made it work. And it doesn't. It never does."

"It's always like this for you," Shen Yuan reminds him with a crooked smile. It feels ridiculous to smile when Luo Binghe looks so helpless, but what else can he do but laugh? "The world Binghe comes from works that way for its Emperor. Maybe not before, but didn't Binghe survive the Abyss and emerge from it when no one else has? Didn't Binghe dominate Xin Mo when weaker hearts have withered beneath its weight? Didn't Binghe win every one

of his battles, triumph where others couldn't? It's normal for Binghe to feel like he can do it all and to be arrogant if it's been a long time since he's genuinely lost. It's normal to fail, even if it's sad *to remind yourself* that it's normal to fail."

Luo Binghe's eyes burn into him. They stare with an almost physical intensity. Shen Yuan can feel his gaze raking over him, and for once, he doesn't feel the typical level of pity people tend to feel for him: no regret or sadness, just a deep incomprehension.

It's not like Shen Yuan understands himself either.

"Yuan-ge's mercy and knowledge are things beyond this Lord's comprehension," Luo Binghe says, his expression intense. His mouth curls in displeasure, his gaze drifting beyond even Shen Yuan. "Even though this one has failed every single time…"

"Hey," Shen Yuan pulls at Luo Binghe's face, holding it in his hands to squeeze it. It's certainly straining on his stiff fingers and wrists, and honestly only makes Luo Binghe's face look strange crushed beneath his fingers. "Beyond failing, Luo Binghe, you've been *trying*. Yes, it might not work out the first time. But nothing ever works out the first time. *You've* been trying. That's worthy of recognition."

The look on Luo Binghe's face makes it clear he doesn't agree. With a sigh, Shen Yuan lets go of his face, but Luo Binghe doesn't move, staring at him from where Shen Yuan left, his eyes fixed on his hands. Shen Yuan knows his hands aren't in the best condition, his knuckles red and swollen, but he's received less intense stares, and he's not sure he can hide his hands for the Demon Emperor's comfort too soon…

"Try, what good are it to this Lord?" Luo Binghe says, his expression blank. His gaze is filled with deep frustration. Shen Yuan *almost* believes he can understand. "I have hurt Yuan-ge time and time again. This Lord's own *son* is scared at him. Whatever this Emperor does, whatever this one *tries* in this world, only leads to failure. How am I supposed to-…"

Luo Binghe looks haggard. His hands are trembling, his eyes are unfocused. There's a deep, abysmal frustration, an utter level of self-loathing that Shen Yuan senses is wrong with him. He is Luo Binghe, after all. Why would anything in the world make him any less so?

But they're not in Luo Binghe's world. And, Shen Yuan surmises, a blow where reality doesn't always turn out in his favor must be horrifying for anyone like Luo Binghe.

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath. He also picks up the pillow beside him, pushing it against Luo Binghe, who flinches, falling silent and staring at the pillow with furrowed brows.

"Buries your face and scream," Shen Yuan orders.

Luo Binghe stares at the pillow and only hesitates for a moment before holding it tightly against his face and *screaming*. He *really* screams. The sound is muffled, but it reverberates so strongly through Luo Binghe that it feels like it's tearing him apart. His hands tremble as he holds the pillow to his face entirely, and like a deep exhalation of anguish, when there is no more scream left, Luo Binghe simply drops the pillow, his hands trembling, his expression exhausted.

“Better?” Shen Yuan asks. Luo Binghe, only slightly hesitant, nods. “Good boy. Getting that out helps. Now: yes, your son is sometimes scared of you. And that’s going to hurt, I’m so sorry. But what have you done in his entire life that makes him *not* scared of you?”

Luo Binghe doesn't reply. He lowers his gaze; now, however, he doesn't seem on the verge of exploding. He looks as if all his energy has been drained, with dark circles under his eyes, his face shadowed, his lips pale. He looks more like a jade statue than ever, his expression immortalized in eternal misery.

“You can’t change the past. But you can do something different from now on,” Shen Yuan insists. Luo Binghe raises his head only slightly, his dark eyes looking too bright. “You ’ve been trying, and it’s been working. I’m sure Chengle wouldn’t have even dared to ask you something like that, or speak to you directly, if he weren’t *less* scared of you. Trying is important. And you’re trying well.”

Luo Binghe exhales slowly. He nods, and while he doesn't look any less miserable, he doesn't look any *more so either.* Which is a win, Shen Yuan supposes.

“As for me…” And again, when Shen Yuan speaks, Luo Binghe frowns a little more. “Aiya, stop looking so miserable, you silly melodramatic. I’ll be fine. It doesn’t mean I’ve *forgiven* you for that dream, but at least this time, you didn’t have any bad intentions. I can’t blame you for that.”

Luo Binghe watches him. His expression barely changes, but it seems to deepen. There’s a strange burning pain in the way his brows furrow slightly, in the grimace below the corner of his mouth. Shen Yuan isn’t even aware of what he’s doing when he suddenly finds himself with his hand on Luo Binghe’s head, patting him. Ah, he supposes it’s a Pavlovian effect; right now, Luo Binghe looks so like his own son, with such a devastated expression, that Shen Yuan can only react in a familiar way.

“I’ll be fine,” Shen Yuan promises, though his own words ring hollow. How many times has he had to say them? How many times has he had to be aware, as they always are, that he would never be *fine*? “You don’t have to worry about me. You can help me figure out how to use those poultices of Mu Qingfang’s if you’re feeling too guilty, and I would really appreciate the help. But I’ll be fine,” he insists, forcing a smile.

Luo Binghe seems to mirror his smile, more as an automatic reflex upon seeing him than an action.

And as it is, just like Shen Yuan's, it doesn't reach his eyes either.

Chapter End Notes

SY: I don't approve of the violence your father displayed
SY, too: However, if someone were to do even the smallest percentage of the damage he suffered to you, I would use double their violence and worse. You need to know that

because in your world, that's acceptable, and I don't feel bad about wanting to kill to keep you safe if necessary :)

LBG, in the kitchen: ...Mobei Jun, he's scared of me
MBJ: ...yes, Junshang, that's what children usually feel when they see their Demon Emperor parents massacre other demons

THIS CHAPTER WAS !!!!! AH, I ENJOYED WRITING IT. BINGGE SAID HOLY FUCK AND FELL ON HIS KNEES. THE POOR BOY. SOMEONE (several of you in fact) MENTIONED THAT BINGMEIFICATION WAS IN PROGRESS. WELL, LET YOOU KNOW IT'S A DAMN SLIDE. ONCE HE FALLS, HE CAN ONLY FALL FASTER :D
Which on one hand makes me feel sad because there are at least two scenes I wanted to happen before his bingmeification that I didn't get around to adding. Oh well, I'll probably make them extra chapters or something. I don't know, they were supposed to be there somewhere, but then days-chapters went by and I couldn't find where :P we'll see

Shotout to that Tumblr post that said it was funny to kidnap Mu Qingfang and that he deserves to be kidnapped, and I burst out laughing because I was actively kidnapping Mu Qingfang while writing this chapter when I saw it

I consciously know that those kinds of things aren't things that should be said or shared with children. My morals (?) were SCREAMING. But I also know what world Chengle comes from, that even despite his current aversion to violence or whatever it might entail, he's actually more naturalized to it than the average child in the modern world. So their sensitivity levels are different. THOSE ARE MY JUSTIFICATIONS AND THE ONES SHEN YUAN WAS DEALING WITH TO BE ABLE TO TALK ABOUT THIS SUBJECT WITH CHENGLE. Thanks for coming to my Ted Talk about how cultural contexts prepare and educate differently according to their experiences, needs, and standards of living appropriate to the times

AH, I MISSED YOU ALL SO MUCH, THANKS FOR READING TODAY'S CHAPTER!!! I HOPE YOU LIKED AND ENJOYED IT!!! I'll be updating today, Friday, and Sunday, and on Monday, we'll return to the regular daily schedule until I have a mental breakdown/j, nah, I'm not. I'll see if I can continue or if we'll continue every other day. It depends on how I continue with my schedule and how I organize myself because I've already started classes and, well *sounds of crying*
YOU KNOW. KUDO-COMMENT-INTERACTION, WELCOME TO THE NEW ONES WHO HAVE BEEN READING IN THE LITTLE BREAK, HUGS AND BIG KISSES TO ALL THOSE WHO HAVE ACCOMPANIED ME, EITHER FROM THE BEGINNING OR SINCE RECENTLY
THANK YOU VERY MUCH. SEE YOU SOON :D

Chapter 18: Eleventh day out - one day before Christmas

Chapter Notes

PUNCTUAL AS A CLOCK-nah I'm lying. I literally set an alarm because I slept all afternoon. Thank goodness I don't have classes on Friday and I'll get all the sleep I couldn't get during the week :P
I LOVE YOU ALL SO MUCH, I REALLY DO, THANK YOU SO MUCH. I SWEAR I'M DYING LAUGHTER WITH ALL OF YOU, YOU'RE ALWAYS THE BEST, THANK YOU!!!!
AGAIN, INCREDIBLE FANART HERE, I'M DROWNING, I NEVER COULDN'T HAVE CAPTURED THE SCENE BETTER!!! THANK YOU!!!!!

No chapter warnings today :D

ENJOY THE CHAPTER!! :3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The moment Luo Binghe places the breakfast plate in front of Shen Yuan the next day, he pushes it away, looking at Luo Binghe with a calm smile, his hands folded in his lap. He looks at Luo Binghe with that same relaxed expression, the smile curving his mouth not even close to anything threatening but still staring at him with the worst of his disapproving looks even if his mouth is set in a smile until Luo Binghe ducks his head slightly and pushes the plate away without saying a single word.

Chengle interrupts biting into one of his favorite dumplings to ask, in a very loud whisper: “Did Yuan-ge not like Father Emperor’s cooking?”

“It had his blood,” Shen Yuan says, and Chengle lets out a gasp of surprise, his small eyes wide. “But don’t worry. I can detect it.”

Luo Chengle nods happily and continues eating. Shen Yuan actually has *no idea* how to detect it. He just assumed that, given the huge failure on the day before, Luo Binghe wouldn't want to just sit idly by.

Shen Yuan had spent much of the afternoon with Luo Binghe insisting that *he must* do something. Which also involved the enormous embarrassment of having to change his warm pajama pants into shorts and letting Luo Binghe follow the instructions for the herbal poultices. He hadn't used his qi again, and although Shen Yuan *longed for* immediate relief, he wasn’t too sure his sanity would appreciate it.

Mu Qingfang's poultices weren't *magical,* but they had managed to turn a level 9 bad day into a level 7 easily, without even much need for massages or too much gratuitous suffering in the process. He didn't dare take any more herbal things, unable to know what effect they would

have on his weakened stomach, but as long as he kept his cane handy and didn't make any sudden movements, he would be fine.

But it was clear that Luo Binghe would not be satisfied with this.

“Father Emperor’s blood can heal,” says Chengle, his cheeks round like a small hamster’s. After chewing and a sip of his congee, he murmurs, “If Father Emperor can heal Yuan-ge, Chengle can draw his blood!”

Despite everything, Shen Yuan bursts out laughing.

“That’s not the problem, darling,” Shen Yuan hums, smiling softly. He reaches out to ruffle his hair. “It’s just that your father’s blood may be… more powerful than my body can possibly handle right now.”

It doesn't mean that Luo Binghe's blood is dangerous, or that Luo Chengle's blood is dangerous. The blood parasites, when dormant, could keep a young Heavenly Demon alive and strong despite all sorts of circumstances. However, Shen Yuan is *fully aware* of all the things related to pain, physical control, and the like that Heavenly Demon blood has.

It’s not that Shen Yuan thinks Luo Binghe could use any of it against him. Not *now*, anyway. He’s not even entirely sure why Luo Binghe didn’t use his blood parasites on him sooner, if only to keep him monitored, to keep an eye on him, or to track him if Shen Yuan decided to run off with Chengle in the middle of the night. It’s just… well. It doesn’t feel bad to be *cautious*, just in case. Besides, even if it wasn’t Luo Binghe’s intention in the first place to nullify his pain perception, he had done it. Shen Yuan isn’t… entirely sure he wants to put his body at fully Luo Binghe’s disposal so soon.

And speaking of the devil. Luo Binghe returns, laying out a clear, clean-looking broth. Beside it, clearer vegetable puree, and nothing there seems to contain even the slightest hint of reddish contamination.

“Thank you,” Shen Yuan says, now. Luo Binghe bows his head, and although he doesn’t smile, the expression on his face is much less tense.

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His pain is between a 5 and 6 the rest of the day. It's painful, tense: standing up strains his joints with difficulty, and when he's still, it's as if fatigue hits him like a wrecking ball. Other than that, and the fact that he's probably discouraged, the day is pretty normal.

Normal, except that both father and son seem to have reached a kind of... *truce.* Shen Yuan didn't hear them speak at any time enough to come to an agreement, but the truth is that neither Chengle denies that Luo Binghe is with them in any room where they are, nor does Luo Binghe seem to detach himself more than a little from Shen Yuan's side.

When the deliveries of the orders that Shen Yuan has made arrive, Luo Binghe almost jumps out of his seat and heads for the door, only halfway there when he turns to look at Shen Yuan with a questioning look in his eyes.

“You don’t have to pay anything, you just can open the door,” Shen Yuan says, letting him do so. Luo Chengle takes his father’s place on the sofa next to him, demanding more hugs, so when Luo Binghe arrives with boxes in his hands, his brow furrows just a little at seeing his spot occupied.

Shen Yuan pinches the boy's cheek and tickles his side until his sweet son returns to the floor cushions to continue playing with his Legos. He's a little obsessed with making a house now, and Shen Yuan understands: he has promised the boy that they will move out, after all. It's normal for Chengle to be excited about it.

“They’re Christmas gifts,” Shen Yuan explains, pointing to the sanitizer sprayer on the side. “Can you spray the boxes?”

Luo Binghe cleans everything before leaving it for him or within his reach. Shen Yuan moves the gift box for Chengle out of sight as subtly as possible, checking it for size and shape, and only when Luo Binghe sits down next to him does he hand him one of the boxes.

“It’s an early gift,” he explains, while Luo Binghe looks at the box in his hands with curiosity. It’s wrapped in plain paper still splashed with sanitizer and isn’t elaborate at all, not even pretty, but Shen Yuan still plans to let his sister do all the wrapping with paper that matches the decoration for all her photos, so paying extra for wrapping would be a waste anyway. “My family will probably want to… well, keep in touch with you. If you have it now, I can explain a little bit about how to use it.”

Luo Binghe still holds the box in his hands, staring at it. His expression, even in profile, is tense.

“You can tell me if you don’t like it,” Shen Yuan says quickly, pushing his shoulder against his own. Which is more painful than it should be, but he’s good at pretending he’s not in pain. “Open it, open it.”

Luo Binghe doesn't destroy the wrapping and opens the box just as Shen Yuan would have expected. In fact, he takes special care with the paper, breaking the taped edges with his nails and carefully removing the white box. When he opens it after setting aside the paper, his eyebrows rise, his mouth opens slightly, and Shen Yuan smiles. It's a good model of smartphone: he'd been researching which one would be the best, and this one has enough memory to last a long time without problems—and it boasts of being resistant to all kinds of hits. He'll still buy it a durable case. He has the feeling that Luo Binghe, not having grown up with the automatic use and care of phones, will drop it or hit it more than he should.

“Is it… an artifact like Yuan-ge’s?” Luo Binghe asks, curious. He lifts it out of its box, unlit, and looks at it in all directions. Despite Shen Yuan’s fears about its carelessness, he is in fact quite careful, examining it with a critical eye. “The one Yuan-ge uses to summon purchases and food, and to store those paintings.”

Shen Yuan finds himself laughing a little tenderly.

“It's a smartphone,” he explains. “Look, it should have some battery left. Press there and…”

They spend the next half hour setting up the phone, from the most basic steps to the main apps. It's not entertaining enough for Chengle to want to participate, but he's definitely startled when Luo Binghe, exploring the general operation, accidentally takes a pic.

“Photo!” says Chengle, recognizing the sound of the shutter. “Yuan-ge, Yuan-ge! I like photos. Let’s take a selfie!”

“Come, come,” Shen Yuan calls, patting the small space between Luo Binghe and him on the sofa. The boy climbs a little more carefully since Mu Qingfang’s warning, leaning down rather more roughly and with less care to crush him or knee him painfully onto his father, wanting to look at the screen. “Father Emperor is doing it wrong! He has to watch with that camera!” the boy points.

“This Lord doesn’t know how to do it,” Luo Binghe says, his voice much softer. “Could Prince Chengle explain?”

Chengle snorts, and now practically perched on his father's lap, he explains how to turn the camera and how to focus correctly. His short arms still hold the phone too close, and so he takes a first selfie, with almost his entire face in the foreground and Luo Binghe's curious face peeking out to one side.

“Like this!” the boy celebrates. Shen Yuan notices, as much as Luo Binghe probably notices with a hand hovering over his back and not seeming to dare to hold him, that this is the first time Chengle has literally advanced to such close contact. “And Father Emperor can take pictures. Lots of pictures! I like it. Do Father Emperor want to see my animal pictures? And I also have of family day with Nainai!”

Chengle puts down his phone, handing it back to Luo Binghe. He blinks, then smiles a little.

“This Lord would like see it very much.”

Chengle jumps off the sofa, jumping the first few steps before running into the bedroom. Shen Yuan has backed up all the zoo photos but has left them on the boy's camera memory so he can show them directly to Airplane or anyone else who wants to see them.

Apparently, it was the right decision.

“He… approached me,” Luo Binghe murmurs, and Shen Yuan can’t help but give him a couple of encouraging pats on the back.

“Well, he likes takes photos,” he explains. It had been a completely normal reaction for Chengle; Shen Yuan had had to mute his own phone because every time he took a screenshot, the imitation sound of a camera shutter triggered a Pavlovian reaction in Chengle that made him want to play with the camera. “And he likes showing off his photos. It’s good that you want to see them.”

“I want to see them,” Luo Binghe says quickly, and Shen Yuan feels the smile tug at his mouth. Truly, Luo Binghe looks a little lost; just a little, with an expression that can’t seem to decide on anything before it falls apart. It’s a little odd, but Shen Yuan isn’t going to judge

him. The poor man must be dealing with a strange number of emotions, he supposes. “I want to see… how he sees the world.”

“That’s good,” Shen Yuan hums, while Luo Binghe looks at his own phone. He keeps trying the buttons, startling when he accidentally takes another photo, this time of the ceiling and a piece of his forehead. Shen Yuan feels like the smile on his face is going to stay there for a long time. “Chengle will like to show it to you.”

When Luo Chengle returns with his small pink camera, Shen Yuan moves a little further to one side of the sofa, leaving room for Chengle to sit comfortably between them. The boy does so, and with just a brief introduction, begins to show him all his photos. Shen Yuan takes the opportunity to take Luo Binghe's phone and finish setting it up: he adds some contacts (mostly: him, Airplane... and, well, it's not like Luo Binghe knows anyone in this world) and downloads some extra basic apps that might be fun for him; Shen Yuan reminds himself to add him to his family music and series streaming plan. And later, maybe he can even download an RPG game for him once Luo Binghe gets more comfortable using it. Or maybe just some fun pizza-making games to pass the time.

Meanwhile, Chengle shows him all the photos in his tiny camera. He explains, at first slowly and then getting excited, all the animals, explanations Shen Yuan had given him, how those animals reacted, and talks about how lionesses hunt, how the tigers looked at him strangely, how kangaroos take care of their babies, and how pandas are just too adorable…

Luo Binghe listens. He looks at each photo, and whenever something really seems to catch his attention, he asks. These aren't evasive or cutting questions: they're sound genuinely interested, and Chengle practically bounces in his seat as he elaborates, explaining, recounting, talking about the toucan's similarities to a bird he and his mother once chased in their world because it stole seeds from a sacred garden and kept them when his mother and Chengle was in a walk nearby, and then he tells about all the monkeys.

Shen Yuan doesn't hold back. His own phone is always on silent, so when he sneaks one (or more) pics of the two of them, neither of them notice. In the picture, they're both leaning over the tiny screen of Chengle's children's camera, with Chengle practically climbing onto his father's lap, diligently showing each image to Luo Binghe, whose expression is much more astonished, his brows relaxed and his eyes free of any negative emotion.

It almost looks like Luo Binghe is smiling.

ShenY: [image]

ShenY: They are making bonds.

ShangHH: AWWWW BROOOO

ShangHH: I'M SUCH A PROUD FATHER AND GRANDFATHER

ShenY: Oh fuck you.

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While the two Heavenly Demons are having their TV time watching Mulan (fifth time for Chengle, first time for a reluctantly curious Luo Binghe), Shen Yuan has already settled back on the sofa with a warm blanket and all his backlog letters.

At this point, the letters are more recognizable in patterns. Sha Hualing comments on the magic paintings, wandering off into random topics in the same sentence as a child on a bit of a sugar overdose or a teenager with ADHD: she notes that Chengle's cheeks are rounder, that his hair is prettier, that he looks much happier, that his clothes are so strange but she likes those colors. Shen Yuan decides to send Sha Hualing some modern jewelry, just to see what she thinks about that kind of fashion. And maybe some cheap decorative resin daggers with those complex, purely aesthetic designs that she could use to decorate her clothes.

Liu Mingyan's letter is less shaky. She seems, somehow, more stable: it's not as brief as the last time, she thanks him for the help, and, above all, she asks a lot of questions about Chengle and how he's been. She also, in handwriting that looks a little stiffer, asks about his brother. Shen Yuan has no idea why Liu Mingyan would ask about Shen Mingsu of all people, but he assumes it has to do with those photographs of the adult using a *bo* against the child carrying a wooden sword.

Shen Yuan makes a mental note to himself to make it clear to Liu Mingyan that his brother is practically harmless and it was just a game.

Mu Qingfang's letter is longer and somewhat amusing to read now that he's met the man in person. There's a *long* introduction in which the doctor expresses his gratitude, in an elaborate and strange way, for Shen Yuan's ability to provide him with otherworldly knowledge. Furthermore, the letter expands into a *long* list of medical questions of all kinds that at some point seem like ramblings, theories, isolated concepts that could be researched if one had the right material or interest.

Shen Yuan guesses that it wouldn’t be difficult for Shen Jiu to forge some documents for Mu Qingfang and enroll him in a medical school at some point, if the man decides to do so. He thinks it might be interesting, and besides, knowing the poor man now and his unstable state, Shen Yuan feels that it might be the only thing keeping him sane.

Also, on the other hand:

“Do crickets really bring luck?” Luo Chengle asks, his voice low. Shen Yuan finds this a little curious—it hasn’t been long since they saw that movie, and Chengle had asked him the same question back then.

“Mn,” Luo Binghe hummed in agreement. “Where there are crickets, it is said there will be good fortune. In particular, there are some Golden-Winged Crickets that *really* bring good luck. But they choose to bless a particular family if they are treated well.”

… Shen Yuan recognized the name of those demonic crickets well, who took the misfortune of others as tribute and gave it as good luck to the family that fed them. But Shen Yuan wasn't going to speak ill of the family of one of Luo Binghe's wives, no matter how much he disliked the woman's family and their complicated plots without a specific resolution.

The film continues. Shen Yuan really likes the way Mulan's character is presented, especially in that first song: not only because it shows the established traditions of the time, but also because of the character's strategic and gentle-hearted nature, demonstrated in specific actions, actions in her everyday life, rather than through others speaking for her.

Chengle likes the song much better, humming it, then laughing out loud at the matchmaker fail, hugging his knees with excited little eyes during Mulan's song.

And, after:

“But they should let her go to war!” Chengle insists, pouting. “Mom’s the best cultivator. She’s not *just* a wife! She’s *strong*.”

“She is,” Luo Binghe acknowledges a moment later. “In some families, however, that’s frowned upon. Chengle’s mother was… lucky. There are families of other… wives of this Lord, who only aspired for them to be wives. As it was, it was the only thing they were raised to be.”

“That’s horrible,” Chengle complains, sulking. Shen Yuan hides his laughter behind the letter he’s reading. “I don’t like it. They should be able to use swords and stab their evil families.”

“Chengle, no,” Shen Yuan warns, which makes Chengle sulk even more and continue watching the movie.

“That would be me making sword forms,” Shen Yuan mocks when Mulan’s father switches from his cane to the sword and clearly can’t handle the first few basic forms, and Chengle laughs a little.

“But Yuan-ge will never go to war!” the boy says, like an afterthought with his eyes too, too intense.

“Never,” Shen Yuan promises, and Luo Chengle nods, satisfied with the strength of his promise. Not that Shen Yuan ever plans to hold a sword, after all. He’s sure he’d lose his balance and hurt himself, or worse, someone else.

Luo Binghe seems extremely amused by the whole miniature dragon and chirping cricket thing, which is incomprehensible to everyone except Mushu. They continue watching the movie, and even Shen Yuan joins in humming the training song, amused by how Luo Chengle has suddenly regained all his energy and is dancing and singing. It's definitely one of Shen Yuan’s favorite scenes from all the Disney movies! One of the best training scenes ever!

They continue with the movie. At this point, Shen Yuan assumes that Luo Binghe is *genuinely* enjoying it, which is extremely amusing. While it's clear he's still wary of what TV

entails and all the things he doesn't fully understand, there's nothing a good children's classic closer to the training aspects he's so familiar with can change.

There's much more seriousness in Chengle once the fun parts are over and the non-singing parts are reached, but he still enjoys even the action, fight, and drama scenes, much more now than he did the first few times he saw it. It's clear the violence has left a disproportionate mark on him, but unlike those early days of that first week, Chengle can now approach it from a different perspective. It's endearing.

Luo Binghe, of course, just as Shen Yuan had expected, seems to be very interested in the battle scene. He stands tensely in place, watching with a clearly expectant expression, almost jumping in place with a clear gleam of triumph on his face as the mountain begins to crumble around the enemies.

The film's finale arrives with all its action and drama. Shen Yuan finds himself too warm, wrapped in a blanket, with cards he's set aside, watching all the joyful reactions of the two Heavenly Demons. It's sweet, he thinks; Luo Chengle enjoys the film part by part, and Luo Binghe seems even more interested than he first thought.

When the Emperor and all of China bow respectfully to Mulan, Shen Yuan feels the same chills he felt when he saw the film as a child. Chengle is oblivious, of course, jumping up and down and bowing excitedly. With a bit of laughter, Shen Yuan watches as Luo Binghe also bows his head slightly, a smile beginning to curve radiantly across his mouth.

The movie comes to an end, and Shen Yuan is sure it couldn't have turned out any better: Chengle is amazed, jumping up and down with energy. Even Luo Binghe seems to have had a good time watching the children's movie.

“Are all these kinds of… animated theaters like this?” asks Luo Binghe, as he returns from the floor to the sofa, leaving Chengle free to move around the coffee table, filling it with crayons of all colors, many papers, and confronting the idea and the difficult path of drawing Mushu without references.

“Not all of them,” Shen Yuan explains, amused. “Some are more… romantic. With princesses rescued by princes, or something like that,” and he laughs a little when Chengle snorts, struggling with the correct color of red. Shen Yuan thinks they’re pretty identical reds, but perhaps the little Heavenly Demons have a different color sensitivity.

Luo Binghe hums a nod. He continues to look at him as if waiting for Shen Yuan to elaborate on his answer, so Shen Yuan just clears his throat, trying to identify what else to explain.

“Personally, Mulan was always one of my favorite movies growing up. It came out when I was about eight, and I liked it a lot more than other movies with princesses or anything like that,” he finds himself smiling, much more amused now, though for different reasons. “It was nice to see a female protagonist who could use a sword and defeat the enemy, although I also like Jasmine as a female character—oh, I'll show you that movie later. Also, the training scene? One of the best.”

Luo Binghe hums a slightly more satisfied nod now.

“It was a good scene,” he says simply, “although… unrealistic. Training an army isn't that simple, nor does it take so little time.”

“It’s fiction,” Shen Yuan scoffs, rolling his eyes. “*Children’s* fiction, too. It should be entertaining *and* fun to attract children. Also, make the love interest clear, though I’m glad it didn’t develop too quickly. Really! More unrealistic than training an army in three weeks. At least they set up a slow, romantic development, not just…” He makes a vague hand wave, trying to explain. How else can he explain to Luo Binghe things about movies he hasn’t seen, like Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, or Sleeping Beauty? Even in Beauty and the Beast, there’s more plot development between the characters to explain their romance, and one of them is a beast for 99% of the movie! “At least they take their time and don’t just marry someone they *just* met.”

Luo Binghe raises an eyebrow. Suddenly, Shen Yuan can feel a deep blush rise from his chest to his entire face, as Luo Binghe's clearly mocking smile and haughty expression reminds Shen Yuan *that he's talking to Luo Binghe,* and that he does marry woman’s he just met. At least half of his wives he hadn't known for more than a month before marrying them, and others he married first for some ridiculous plot and had their romantic development later.

“Mmn,” Luo Binghe said, his mouth curling even further. It’s a smile that clearly seems to want to humiliate Shen Yuan. “Perhaps it’s because of the… love interest, as Yuan-ge called it. It’s probably because he’s not that handsome or that charming. One would say he’s even *weak*.”

“Hey,” Shen Yuan protests, daring to elbow Luo Binghe. It’s a good thing Luo Binghe doesn’t move to avoid it, because otherwise Shen Yuan would have completely lost his balance. “Don’t mess with him. He’s one of my favorites. What do you mean, he’s not that handsome? Did you actually see those muscles? He is the ultimate love interest protagonist! Besides being strong, he is sensitive and honest! How would that make him weak? We were watching the same movie, Binghe!”

Luo Binghe makes a sound of disagreement. It's funny how he can do it while smiling, as if suddenly pleased by something.

“Of course he’s not *that* handsome, nor even *smart*. If he had been, he would have noticed very soon that Mulan was a woman, decided to help her, and he would have gone to her tent to…” and Shen Yuan rushes forward to cover Luo Binghe’s mouth with the pillow, a look alluding to the boy who, although he is painting, is *clearly* listening to them attentively even if it doesn’t seem like it. Luo Binghe laughs behind the pillow, his eyes curving into crescents, and moves the pillow away. “…he would have started a *proper courtship* while helping her become the heroine.”

“Well,” Shen Yuan says, a little relieved that Luo Binghe doesn’t mention things like papapa in front of the children. Seriously! How disrespectful! “But Mulan doesn’t need any man’s help to become the heroine. That’s the best part. She makes plans, executes them, is brave and tries hard. And she doesn’t need any romantic interest to gain respect or honor.”

“That’s… interesting,” Luo Binghe notes, and Shen Yuan almost struts. Wonderful, well-captured interest! Perhaps even Luo Binghe could take a lesson home with him, too? “This

Lord knows few women who *don't need* saving."

"Mnh, I guess," Shen Yuan grimaces. Not that he can say that, well, it's part of the gift and curse of a stallion protagonist to have to save women for his harem. Wherever Luo Binghe goes, there will be plots about wives wanting to be executed, anyway. It's a good thing he barely leaves the house, watching it like this. "Anyway, it's a movie. It's entertaining and should leave a message for the children who watch it. And interesting songs."

"This Lord understands," Luo Binghe says, his smile returning to his face. It's a relaxed, bright, and lopsided kind of smile, something truly entertaining to watch. "Of course, Yuan-ge finds songs *interesting*, especially the *characters* singing them. Anyway, training an army with songs…"

Shen Yuan snorts a laugh. He continues laughing for a while until Chengle starts showing off his drawings and sits again in the middle, clearly incensed at being left out of a conversation about a movie he really likes, grumbling and ranting about how Mushu is awesome and how he wants one (and Shen Yuan throws *a* single warning glance at Luo Binghe that makes the man close his mouth before he assures him that he can get him one. Oh no. There will be no xianxia dragons in his apartment. *Especially not* if they talk). The truth is, despite the general discomfort and the aching muscles, Shen Yuan is almost certain that this is one of the best days he's had in a long, long time.

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Shen Yuan takes a nap in the afternoon, at some point. He's not entirely sure how intentional it was on his part to fall asleep, but he assumes that at least Luo Binghe helped him shift onto the sofa horizontally when he did so, so that his back wouldn't get cramped, because when he wakes up it's about two hours later, covered in his blanket, yawning and stretching with a slight stiffness in his muscles, and no sign of either the boy or his father in sight.

However, he can hear a small noise in the kitchen—probably what woke him—so he's sure Luo Binghe hasn't run off with the child under his arm. His fear of losing Chengle is still there, but it doesn't burn as fiercely as it had a few days ago. He supposes it's because he's begun to trust Luo Binghe *just a little*.

It's hard to stand up and hard to get to the kitchen, but when he gets to the door and hasn't even entered, he covers his mouth to keep from laughing.

"I can't do it!" Chengle continues complaining, flour smeared on his face, clothes, and even strands of his hair pulled back in a high bun. "It's ugly! I don't like it!"

"Carefully," Luo Binghe continues, flattening the dough against the boy's hand. "You have to press it and shape it. Then you can add a filling, and it won't be… bad."

"I don't like it," the boy continues. He sniffs, pouting. "Many have already become ugly. I'm no good. I hate it."

Shen Yuan can see exactly the misshapen buns on the table, where the dough has torn as it was stretched, and the filling has oozed out and squished into irregular shapes in various

directions. The buns don't look discarded, but lined up neatly against other perfect buns, as if they're in the same state of readiness to be cooked. Watching his pouting children, and Luo Binghe leaning in front of him to flatten the dough against his little hand, Shen Yuan can feel a enormous warmth spread throughout his chest.

“My first attempts when was a kid were bad, too,” Luo Binghe says, his mouth strangely soft. The informality doesn’t suit him so badly. “But it’s okay. Just…” and his smile is something that it looks as if even surprises him, “you just have to keep trying.”

Shen Yuan smiles behind his hand. He feels a strange sensation against his throat, something that seems to drown him in warmth, reaching behind his eyes. Ah. It's just that his little boy pouts so adorable, but his eyes are so bright, and now he flattens the dough with a little less brutality but more determination, and when his father puts the bun filling inside and Chengle closes it, it only tears a little at the edges. The boy also perhaps tears off a little more dough than he should when it pools around the bun closure, but he flattens it, and it can be easily concealed.

“Much better,” says Luo Binghe, and with what seems like a hesitant, tentative movement at first, he gently pats Chengle’s head.

Chengle looks surprised. A moment later, the smile that replaces his pout is small, but bright.

Shen Yuan feels like he might spontaneously combust from how tender they both look. He also feels like his leg is going to give way a little, so he taps his cane harder as he moves forward, and both father and son look up at him. Shen Yuan is abruptly stunned: seriously, look at those eyes! They shine just the same! No one could ever doubt that these two could be father and son even if they only saw their eyes. Too adorable for his fragile heart.

“Well, well,” he hums, and Luo Chengle, still holding his bun, runs towards Shen Yuan.

“Yuan-ge, Yuan-ge!” he squeals, jumping up and down. “Look, look. Father Emperor is teaching me how to make dinner buns. So, I can make buns for Yuan-ge!”

“That’s wonderful,” Shen Yuan hums, looking at the small bun in the boy’s hand. It really does look like it’s going to fall apart. It also looks like the best bun Shen Yuan has ever seen in his entire life, and his chest swells with pride. “Aren’t you the smartest and most talented child in the world? Look how well you’re doing it!”

“Yuan-ge,” the boy protests, pinching the edges of the bun. “It doesn’t look good! Look. It broke here. And here. It’s ugly.”

“I don’t see that stuff,” Shen Yuan says, and Chengle pouts. “I just see my child covered in flour who made a pretty bun.”

Chengle's smile widens. Before rushing in for a hug, he moves forward gently and gently wraps his free arm around him. Shen Yuan laughs, patting his head and sending the boy back to his buns.

He doesn't even know when, but Luo Binghe has brought one of the dining room chairs into the kitchen, and Shen Yuan thanks him as he takes a seat. There, with a lopsided smile and snapping a few pics for posterity, he watches as Luo Binghe teaches Chengle how to make the buns, how much filling to use, how to flatten the dough properly, how to moisten the edges with just the right amount. The boy pays attention, the tip of his tongue hanging out of his mouth, eyes shining, and rocking back and forth, as if even then, with all his attention focused on his father's lessons, he can't quite sit still.

And Shen Yuan finds himself with a heart bigger than ever, almost burning against his ribs, unable to not miss the way Luo Binghe has completely lowered all his barriers, unable not to notice how Chengle is shining. It's clear there's still a small wariness there: Luo Chengle's smile isn't that big, and before he accepts a hint or a compliment, he seems wary of it. But it's clear there's been a change, and a big one.

It's clear that Luo Binghe has been trying hard.

Shen Yuan can feel his chest burning; it's not painful, though. The heat is scorching, spreading from his heart to almost every breath he takes, clogging his throat with an absolutely ridiculous lump of tears he *won't* let out. He's just... emotional about it. Because when Luo Chengle makes another bun, one so much better than the last, he still looks at Shen Yuan first with that vibrant little smile of having achieved something and being proud of it, but now that smile doesn't fade when he looks at Luo Binghe for his approval too.

Away from all the coldness and tension, Luo Binghe is making a visible effort. Visible not only in his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, visible not only in his lowering of his voice and not giving so many orders as directions. Visible in his questions, in his listening, in his paying attention.

Luo Binghe's eyes shine like stars, and for a moment, Shen Yuan believes that perhaps Luo Binghe *really is*... well. That after all, he isn't just a father who has abandoned his children and responsibilities just to pursue a ridiculous revenge. Weren't those his own words to Chengle? A sleeping heart, a heart filled with so much pain that can't respond to anything other than that pain because it doesn't know how to do anything else...

It's clear that, with just a little guidance in the right direction, Luo Binghe is proving that despite Shen Yuan's preconceived ideas about the whole thing, he *really* could love his son despite how much he has forgotten what love looks like or even feels like.

And, as long as that redemption involves the Chengle's well-being, Shen Yuan can accept it with all that that means.

Chapter End Notes

SY: Li Shang is definitely the most handsome Disney character. He has those huge muscles, an attractive face, he's charming and sensitive, with a kind heart, and the ability

to recognize his mistakes and act accordingly
SY: All of this seen from a completely heterosexual perspective and appreciative of the male image as a spectrum of analysis
LBG: *taking notes* Yeah, yeah, so what else does Yuan-ge like about that Li Shang...?

sip of tea My sister and I watched Mulan to have closer references when I wrote this chapter. Was it necessary? Not really, but my headcanon is that Shen Yuan's childhood gay awakening was when he saw Li Shang when he took off his robes for the first time in the training scene. Of course, he wouldn't have rationalized how gay he is until... well, he still can't rationalize it right now, he just assumes it's okay to find strong, muscular guys cool
Anyway, Binghe is having beef with another fictional character, and by romantic interest standards, he's losing. He's taking it with grace

Luo Binghe has been caught trying to put blood in Shen Yuan's food!! Just for laughs, I had a scene planned beforehand where Luo Binghe was put in time-out alone with his thoughts as punishment for, well, situations- I'm planning on doing a little extra or some such nonsense with those ideas because they don't EXACTLY fit my timeline anymore (though I do plan on recycling the general concept of a couple of them... eventually), but if you're curious, I summarized here what they are :P

TOO CLOSE TO THE CHRISTMAS PARTY! :D I feel like I've built up an exaggeratedly high expectation with the disaster that the Shen Christmas night may (or may not) be, but honestly? I'm really having a lot of fun hehehehe

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING. WOW. SERIOUSLY BEING ON THIS JOURNEY WITH YOU ALL IS CRAZY. WE'VE COME SO FAR. THE ARDUOUS PROCESS OF BINGMEIFICATION HAS ALREADY BEGUN, AND WE'RE THERE IN LESS THAN A MONTH OF POSTING. CHILLS. I THANK YOU FOR BEING AS CRAZY AS I AM AND JOINING IN!!! AND, AND, YOU KNOW!! I hope you enjoyed the chapter a lot!!! I genuinely had fun writing it; this little family deserved a quiet slice-of-life day, after all, with all the time they have for—ehem, ehem... Well, you know!!!! Kudo-comment-interaction, I'm so grateful for everything, you always make me so happy!!
See you soon :D

Chapter 19: A Christmas dinner

Chapter Notes

This chapter arrived two hours late because-
Me: Oh, wake me up at four, okay? I have to edit today's chapter and it's a bit long Dx
My sister: Sure! Get a good nap :D
Me, waking up, clearly seeing that it's MUCH darker than four: ...what time is?
My sister: Five to seven, but you NEEDED to sleep :D
That was a stab in the back. I won't trust her with my sleep again, wicked little gremlin (affective)

WE ALSO HAVE FANART TODAY, YOU CAN SEE IT HERE. I KEEP WATCHING IT AND LAUGHING EVERY TIME

Also, I just learned - did you know that in China, apples are traditionally given at Christmas? The Chinese word for apple (苹果 - píngguǒ) sounds similar to the Chinese word for Christmas Eve / Paceful Night (平安夜 - píng'ān yè), so pretty apples are often given as gifts of good wishes of peace, good fortune, etc,. All I can say is, dude, am I surprised at how much Chinese people love wordplay

Anyway, there are no warnings in this chapter!
Enjoy! :3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan runs the hottest bath he can, taking all his time to relax in the warm water. He even stirs several of the silky oils brought by Mu Qingfang into the water, and when he steps out of the tub, he's sure he smells of medicinal herbs. He dresses in shorts momentarily, and while Chengle is still peacefully sleeping cuddled with his Dawang Tiger, Shen Yuan makes his request to Luo Binghe for help sound more like a demand, and Luo Binghe helps with the poultices. Shen Yuan even allows him to use *just a little* qi to ease the aching tension in his muscles.

Just a little, just easing the pain, like that first night.

Luo Binghe does. He's already awake before Shen Yuan, which is ridiculous—what the hell time of day does this man sleep? Shen Yuan woke up at seven in the morning. He seems to have taken a bath sometime during the night, and he's still wearing the ridiculous pajamas Shen Yuan bought him back when they weren't getting along yet…

And it is while Shen Yuan is watching Luo Binghe apply poultices to the tension on the back of his knees, ankles and spreading herbal ointments that burn on contact but make a pleasant

hot chill that eases the stiffness of his pain, that Shen Yuan realizes that *he has started to get along* with Luo Binghe.

He's never thought about it, not actively. It's true that he's no longer afraid that Luo Binghe will try to kill him. Yes, he *sometimes* remembers the terrifying feeling of Luo Binghe's hand drilling him in that nightmare, but it's even more distant. It's not even something that haunts him in his dreams. Luo Binghe turns out to be a... roommate? A co-parent?, quite *tolerable* since he's started cooking and, recently, cleaning so he's not stepping on the suspiciously fallen Legos around his sofa.

Well, that's *better*. After all, he figures Chengle will like the fact that his two… parental figures? get along and tolerate each other better than having to watch them argue. It's not like he knows much about growing up with parents who constantly argue about everything without regard for their children's mental health, but according to Airplane, it's not fun at all.

Which also reminds him that he needs to send a car to Airplane's house to pick him up, and that, with luck, Airplane will be dressed half an hour earlier, and at least somewhat combed. Shen Yuan didn't buy him those hair creams just for his bathroom decoration. And speaking of clothes...

Shen Yuan looks Luo Binghe up and down, wondering exactly *what* to do with him. It's not like he can just wear anything and not look like a fucking supermodel. The problem, Shen Yuan thinks, is that *there's too much of him.* He's too much. Any piece of clothing he puts on will make him fucking stand out, and he's too sure that even if he dresses him in an extremely ugly sweater, the bastard will only make them fashionable.

Plus, it would ruin his mom's Christmas photos.

Shen Yuan sighs. One thing at a time.

“Yuan-ge looks quite tired,” Luo Binghe says, helping him to his feet after the whole damn… medical session? Shen Yuan doesn’t even want to think about why Luo Binghe would offer all that, but he’s not going to complain. He can take steps without trembling in pain, and that’s a positive thing. “It’s an important day, Yuan-ge should get more rest.”

“Maybe later,” he murmurs. He’ll probably need a nap, but he has a lot to do right now. “We have to be at my sister’s house at four. We’re supposed to be the first ones there, but it’s mostly because my sister wants to meet you without people around to interrogate you at will and be threatening.” And Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. “Please, *please* don’t flirt with her.”

Luo Binghe lets out a light, humorless laugh. Shen Yuan snorts.

“This Lord promises not to flirt *with Yuan-ge’s sister*,” he hums, and Shen Yuan raises an eyebrow at him, crossing his arms with his best reproachful look. Now, Luo Binghe looks appropriately scolded, so he only smiles a little wider. “Ah, does Yuan-ge not trust this Emperor’s word? Really, when this Lord has only kept his promises…”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. He grips his cane out of instinct, more for support than aggression. His wrist throbs with pain, but it’s a familiar ache and more stiffness

than anything else. “So, about the food…?”

“This Lord has already cooked something,” Luo Binghe says quickly. His exhausted face seems to radiate a satisfied glow that Shen Yuan hasn’t seen in a long time. In fact, he’s not entirely sure he’s seen it at all in all the time Luo Binghe has been living with them. “This Emperor has been working on preparing an exquisite roast duck with a sweet sauce. Two, in fact, will that be enough? This one saw a recipe on the phone that it’s usually served with crepes, so this Lord looked up a recipe for them. Also, this one has cooked those tiny caramelized carrots in the same sauce as the duck, and quite a few of the small green peas Chengle usually eats are already ready. This Lord has also made a lighter broth for Yuan-ge, and different purees and soft sauces for him to try in small, controlled portions and…”

Shen Yuan listens intently, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing at the display of the great Demon Emperor's talk of food and cooking. His face has a warm glow, something that shines through the tired shadows, and suddenly Luo Binghe is the one who breaks off, as if he's dealing with himself and how he's been speaking, because his brow furrows a little, as if he's struggling with a complicated idea.

Shen Yuan can't help but laugh a little.

“Wow, Binghe did it well, what a good boy,” he congratulates, because he can’t do anything else. And Luo Binghe, the great melodramatic, flinches as if Shen Yuan had stabbed him. “Ah, but how long have you been cooking? You couldn’t have done all that in an hour, not even in two. Have you even *slept?”*

“This Emperor has no need for something as *trivial* as sleep,” Luo Binghe protests, narrowing his eyes. Shen Yuan raises an eyebrow, clearly mocking and wanting to remind him of the time he found him practically passed out on the sofa—a line of thought Luo Binghe seems to clearly follow, because it’s amusing how quickly he sulks. “This Lord has worked his body and soul into a weapon, able to survive without the sustenance of sleep or food for longer than any—”

“Yes, I know, I know,” Shen Yuan patted his arm reassuringly. “That doesn’t mean the food isn’t good and you don’t like eating it. Take advantage and take a nap when I wake Chengle up, okay? I’ll lend you the bed, and you can even cuddle a tiger.”

Luo Binghe's mouth closes and tightens into a thin line. He doesn't nod, but he doesn't refuse either, which Shen Yuan takes as a good victory. Well, even better: he's sure Luo Binghe needs a good night's sleep—or a morning, in this case—before facing his family.

Shen Yuan, at least, needs that too, and desperately.

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“Yuan-ge, my, my, look at you! You look handsome, what a surprise! Here, here, those boxes. Seriously, couldn’t you have asked the driver to bring them with you?” is what his Meimei greets him with. Shen Yuan lets her give him an awkward welcoming hug and lets himself in, ready to slump into the nearest comfortable seat within reach, dumping all the gift boxes in his Meimei’s arms with all the rudeness that would anger his mother if she saw him. “And

what a cute little boy! Look at you, Chengle, little sheep! You're taller! Are those braids? You look so cute tonight!"

Shen Yuan plopped down on the comfortable armchair in his Meimei's apartment, nearly crying with relief. They hadn't had far to walk, but they had to walk halfway across the parking lot from where his mother's driver had dropped them off, then went up to the front desk and wait standing there until the receptionist confirmed their visit. Shen Yuan was balancing his gift packages, and even Chengle was carrying a small bag with some other smaller packages and a lot of apples, while Luo Binghe had been relegated to carrying his very busy hands with all the food he had prepared to distribute among the family dinner. And after being accepted by the building's receptionist, they had to wait for the elevator and...

Well. Shen Yuan is quite exhausted.

"And you must be the *father*," Meimei says, her voice so firm and determined that Shen Yuan remembers she's also Jiu-ge's sister. "Well, I hope you don't plan on leaving again."

"Not at all," Luo Binghe says firmly, too. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Luo Binghe. Your brother has spoken a lot about you, and only positive things," Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan doesn't have to look at him to know that the man has a charming smile. It had taken Shen Yuan almost half an hour of practice to force Luo Binghe to leave behind the formal language. Hearing him speak so informally still sent shivers down Shen Yuan's spine.

His Meimei hums something that *almost* sounds friendly. By now, Chengle is already standing in front of Shen Yuan, having abandoned his bag somewhere along the way, and Shen Yuan only has to extend his arms a little for the child to take refuge in them.

"Isn't Father going to marry Yuan-ge's Meimei?" the boy whispers, and Shen Yuan laughs, shaking his head.

"I forbade him," he whispers, placing a soft kiss on the boy's forehead. "Aren't you the most beautiful boy in the world? Look at you, those clothes look so lovely on you."

"I don't like it *now*," the boy complains, tugging at the hem of his sweater. "This sweater looks like Father's. I don't like it."

"But it looks like mine too." Shen Yuan tugs at the collar of his own sweater. They're wearing different shades of red, and actually, while Chengle's sweater is lighter than both of theirs and has some pretty beautiful embroidery, it still looks quite similar to Luo Binghe's. It's not like Shen Yuan did it on purpose, it's just… well. They were the only similar sweaters out of all of them, with similar patterns and in the same color scheme, and Shen Yuan guessed his mother would appreciate it for family photos. "Isn't it nice that we match?"

Chengle pouts, but reluctantly agrees. He's a good boy, and Shen Yuan can only adore him more every moment of the day, and he's not sure his adoration for him will ever wane.

Meanwhile, Meimei seems to have everything under control. She guides Luo Binghe to the kitchen where he can unpack his food containers and probably get questioned a lot along the way. Shen Yuan is too fatigued to intervene, and Chengle seems quite content in his embrace,

though it doesn't take long for him to start looking with curious, sparkling eyes at the decorations: just as Shen Yuan had expected and assumed, they are pretty, not too overdone, mixing Western Christmas decorations with traditional touches like red lanterns, a few red banners with gold decorations, and quite good taste.

Meimei's Christmas tree, moreover, is a large, perfectly decorated white tree, filled with red, clear, and gold spheres, and lots of glitter. It's almost painful to look at, the golden equivalent of a disco ball.

“Yuan-ge’s Meimei’s house is awesome!” Chengle says, after a deep, curious look. “It’s shiny. And it has lots of sofas. I like it. Yuan-ge! Can we have lots of sofas in the new house?”

“That would be a good idea. We could get one that turns into a bed so we can watch movies there,” Shen Yuan hums, brushing his fingers through the boy’s hair. His hand is shaking slightly, so he gently lowers it, moving it away from Chengle’s view. “How about you take a look? As long as you’re very careful and don’t break anything, Meimei won’t be mad at you going through all her things. I promise.”

It's a risky bet, but he knows his Meimei. Chengle is clumsy, but he's managed to be careful and has shown he knows how to value fragile things, so the boy is suddenly examining everything with his little hands behind his back, from the colorful tree to the decorations on the furniture. Shen Yuan feels his head a little light and his muscles too sore; it's an ache that comes with exhaustion, a heaviness that even settles at the base of his neck and his forehead, and his Meimei's armchair is so comfortable that he thinks he might even fall asleep.

But no. He stays awake, his eyelids still fluttering and closing every time he nods off. Chengle entertains himself with the enormous windows that show the city below after snooping around everywhere, staring in amazement at the small lights of a white city passing by on the street in that great distance.

Shen Yuan forces himself to stay awake and listen–…

“…I just hope it doesn’t happen again,” his sister is saying. Her voice is firm, and something about it reassures Shen Yuan. “My brother may have forgiven you, but *I* won’t. He didn’t need that kind of responsibility, and yet he accepted it with everything it entailed.”

“The only thing I should correct you with is that your brother hasn’t forgiven me,” Luo Binghe says. His voice is far from flirtatious, and that relaxes Shen Yuan even more. “I’m… fine with that. I’m not someone who deserves his forgiveness, which doesn’t mean I won’t work hard to get it. I don’t plan on drifting away again. I want to be a… better father to Chengle. To show Yuan-ge that he’s not wrong to believe I can… improve, that I can change.”

“I hope so,” his sister says, after what seems like a long deliberation about how honest Luo Binghe might be being. And then, as if she’s broken all the tension: “But, wow, is this duck? Wow, it smells delicious. Where did you buy it?”

“I cooked it. Also, broths and purees for Yuan-ge,” says Luo Binghe, and they start talking about food.

Shen Yuan has no idea when he falls asleep, despite his best efforts to keep his eyes open. One moment Chengle is staring out the light-dappled window to one side, and the next Shen Yuan is startled as his neck wrenches with a pain too unbearable to turn over in his sleep. The large table has already been decorated with tablecloths and napkins, the chairs rearranged, and Airplane is sitting on one of the sofas near looking like he's in a damned dream, his eyes wide in astonishment, tense in his corner of his sit, as if afraid that at any moment he might be forced to get up and be ready in case just in case.

Well, he's used those hair creams, and Shen Yuan has gotten the size of all his clothes right, and they also fit him quite well, even though he looks stiff and uncomfortable in them, clearly unused to wearing anything other than old sweatshirts. Despite that, his expression isn't terrified. And that's a good thing.

“Hey,” he says, when Shen Yuan lazily makes eye contact. “You’re awake. I thought we should get you a Prince Charming.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Shen Yuan growls, rubbing his face. He sits up a little, and while the rest has done his fatigue some good, the position definitely *hasn’t* done his muscles any good. His neck creaks, straining, and Shen Yuan grimaces. “Ah, heck. Airplane, could you get me a warm cloth? Just take one of Meimei’s dishcloths and put it in the microwa—”

“Here,” and Shen Yuan is so startled that his neck *cracks* painfully when, so silently, Luo Binghe is suddenly at his side. He’s holding out… well, it *doesn’t* look like a dishcloth but rather some kind of expensive, neatly folded silk scarf, but when Shen Yuan accepts it and places it around his neck, the fabric is pleasantly warm. “I figured Yuan-ge would need it.”

“Thank you,” he murmurs, letting the relief wash over him little by little. It’s not immediate, which he’d like, but it’s true that with the contact with the warmth, it feels as if the stiffness is slowly loosening. “God, I feel like I was hit by a truck. How much sleep did I have?”

“A little over an hour,” Luo Binghe hums. He sits casually on the arm of the armchair where Shen Yuan is sitting, his hand settling on the warm cloth Shen Yuan keeps around his neck. The warm qi is *almost* shy, like a small animal approaching after being harshly scolded. Shen Yuan lets it run through him, loosening the horrible tension in his neck, shoulders, and back; he still feels pain, but it’s much less, and he feels only a little dizzy with relief. “Yuan-ge needed sleep more than I did.”

“Mn, Binghe certainly didn’t think so when he agreed to stay in bed longer this morning,” Shen Yuan mocks a little, rolling his eyes. He hears Airplane’s choking sound, so he raises his eyebrow at him. “*What?*”

“Nothing, nothing!” Airplane’s ears are red and he’s waving his hands. Then he freezes, his face turning even paler. “Uh, nothing! *Really*! I’m going to find Chengle! To play with him! Has Yu-mei stopped taking pictures of him with that reindeer headband…?”

Airplane walks away. Shen Yuan, with better neck mobility now, turns to look at Luo Binghe. He has an expression that's *too* innocent to have given Airplane some intimidating look. Shen Yuan doesn't hesitate as he pinches his leg sharply.

“Don’t scare my friends or family,” he warns. Luo Binghe smiles as if the pinch is nothing more than a mosquito bite. Well, knowing Luo Binghe, probably. “Did anyone else came? What did I miss?”

Luo Binghe fills him in on the latest news: they’ve decorated a bit more, Meimei has wrapped the gifts in some strange, shiny paper, Airplane has arrived carrying a container of food that doesn’t smell too good and some apples, then Meimei has taken Chengle off to take a few pictures of him while Luo Binghe warms up some of the food in the oven on low heat. Shen Yuan snorts, wondering if *he should* make it clear to Meimei that she’s not allowed to upload any of Chengle’s photos online or allow her to expose his son to all the weirdo people on the internet, when the doorbell rings.

Shen Yuan's neck is already feeling less sore, but just as he tries to stand up, Meimei comes barreling back. She's got her professional camera around her neck, and Chengle is following her around with his tiny pink camera also around his neck like a duckling chasing a mother duck. Shen Yuan finds himself smiling so sweetly that when Jiu-ge and Yue-ge walk in, he doesn't even remember how upset he was with Shen Jiu.

So Shen Jiu makes eye contact directly with him *just* once, looks away, and Shen Yuan knows it's going to be a *fucking long night.*

“Uncle Yue!” says Chengle, jumping up and down. “You brought food!”

“A little bird told me you like my cooking,” Yue Qi says, showing the boy the large covered pot. Meimei carefully picks it up, allowing Yue Qi more room to take off his shoes and better maneuver the bags of gifts and apples. “What else could I do but bring it?”

“Hey, doesn’t your Uncle Jiu have a greeting, you little one?” Shen Jiu says. Chengle, like a wrecking ball, rushes forward to hug his legs, and Shen Jiu has that small lapse of genuine emotion on his face, a smile that could almost be sweet as he pats Chengle’s little head. “There, there. Let me take off my shoes, or I’ll step on your little toes with my dirty shoes, and you won’t like it. Wow, that’s a pretty camera. Are you going to be the official photographer tonight?”

Shen Yuan sighs in relief. Well, Shen Jiu *may* be furious with him, but at least he won't be rude to Chengle, and that's a win-win.

Luo Binghe, tense as a bow on the verge of being shot, doesn't seem to think so. Shen Yuan pats his leg, perhaps a little too forcefully, to get his attention.

“Help me,” he demands rather than asks just to get his attention, and Luo Binghe seems to wake up from a trance, shaking his head and helping Shen Yuan to his feet. It’s a little difficult when the armchair doesn’t have the right angle to help him stand; Meimei’s chairs and couches may be comfortable, but they’re not suitable for people who need an angle and

proper position to support themselves when they want to stand up. “Good boy, you won a cookie. Let me introduce you, follow me.”

Shen Yuan doesn't make much progress despite all the effort he puts into wielding his cane. He's open to introductions, of course, but he can't even open his mouth when Shen Jiu marches straight toward Luo Binghe. In fact, Shen Yuan holds his breath, waiting for his brother's greatest outburst of madness last Christmas when—

“Well,” Shen Jiu says, looking him up and down. Disapproval is stark on his face; he sweeps him with a hostile glare from the home slippers Shen Yuan had bought him to the roots of his hair. “Mother was right. *Incredibly*,” is all he says, and holds out his hand. “My dumb young brother hasn’t introduced us properly before, I’m afraid. But what does he know of manners? I hope he won’t raise *my* nephew that way.”

“Hey,” Shen Yuan protests, only to be ignored.

Shen Jiu extended his hand in the air. The expression on his face is… Shen Yuan isn't quite in his right mind to dare guess. He doesn't look malicious. In fact, he actually looks almost pleased, but in a way that's a bit more sardonic than it should be.

Luo Binghe hesitates to extend his hand. When he does, accepting the shake, it is Shen Jiu who squeezes his hand tightly, moving it up and down. It is clearly a *much* stronger grip than necessary.

“I hope *Shen* Chengle’s progenitor doesn’t think of disappearing again and committing another act of child abandonment,” Shen Jiu says, with such venom in his voice that Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. It’s *unbelievable*. The bastard. “As long as you don’t, it’s *nice* to meet you.”

“…the pleasure is mine,” Luo Binghe replies, and when Shen Jiu lets go, stepping away to continue asking Chengle about his photos and picking up one of the bags they’d left on the floor, Shen Yuan sighs. He watches them head into the kitchen to unpack their things. His sister has put on some low music that’s playing rhythmically at a medium-low volume, and Shen Yuan can only think that, among all the things that could have gone wrong, *it could have been worse.*

Ah. Although the night hasn't even begun yet.

“I’m sorry,” he says to Luo Binghe in a low voice. He has gone as still as a stone, tense at every edge. “I told you, he’s… well. Rude.”

“He could be worse,” Luo Binghe says, extending and offering his arm to Shen Yuan. “Does Yuan-ge need help?”

“I have my cane,” Shen Yuan says, but he still accepts the arm and lets Luo Binghe help him to another couch a little higher up near the decorate tree, where he can settle back against the soft cushions and relax his limbs a bit. Luo Binghe sits down next to him. “Ah, I really thought he would be worse. But still, I don’t recommend letting your guard down.”

“I won’t,” Luo Binghe promises. And a moment later: “*Shen* Chengle?”

“Ah,” Shen Yuan feels a sudden and warm shame. Well, it’s not like he’s actively thought about it, and honestly, does that even count as adoption? A surprise legal adoption of a child he’d already emotionally adopted? Shen Yuan isn’t sure how to proceed with any of it. “Well. To be in… well, here, Chengle needed some paperwork. I was planning on enrolling him in a school, though I wanted to deal with his separation anxiety and all that first. And, uh, I asked Jiu-ge to… make some legal papers for him. And, well. He took his liberties.”

“I see,” Luo Binghe hums. And then, a little mockingly, he says, “*Shen* Chengle. Yuan-ge really has…”

“Shut up,” Shen Yuan protests, embarrassed. “I’m sorry, okay? My brother just *did it*. I was going to legally register him as *Luo*. I mean, it’s not like I’m stealing him from you or anything like that. For all you know, that’s *not* what it’s about. I…”

“This Lord understands,” Luo Binghe says. Shen Yuan nudges him, and a smile spreads across Luo Binghe’s lips. “*I* understand. Apologies.”

“So formal,” Shen Yuan scoffs, rolling his eyes. “It’s not like Chengle… stops being your son or anything. It’s just, well. It’s like I’ve become his father, too? At least legally, in this world, he’s *also* my son.”

Luo Binghe nods. He leans in a little beside him, and Shen Yuan assumes he's just settling into his seat—after all, while it is a firmer couch, it’s also a bit more uncomfortable than the one that Shen Yuan has at home—so when Luo Binghe practically rests his chin against his shoulder, his breath tickling his neck, Shen Yuan freezes, a horrible chill running down his spine.

“How inconsiderate of Yuan-ge” Luo Binghe leans close, his voice dipping into a mock-pout “to make this Lord bear a son for Yuan-ge, before pleasing this humble one with even a proper wedding night…” he whispers, just before Shen Yuan smashes a pillow in his face.

“What’s wrong with you!” Shen Yuan protests, and Luo Binghe lets out a loud laugh as Shen Yuan keeps trying to hit him hard with the pillow, which is probably less painful than hitting him with his cane, but Shen Yuan’s face is too hot to do anything else. “Seriously! What are those lines, huh?! What the hell are you talking about! What’s wrong with you, *really*?!”

Luo Binghe continues to laugh even as Shen Yuan presses the pillow against his own face in embarrassment. What the hell, Luo Binghe?! Seriously?! Those kinds of lines aren't said to men, even when joking! They could easily be misinterpreted if someone heard them!

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His parents are the next to arrive. His mother covers Chengle's little face with red kisses, and it's his father who makes the effort to carry him to the bathroom to help clean him up when he sees that Shen Yuan is barely holding his soul today, right after greeting him and shaking hands in another firm (and clearly not very approving) handshake with Luo Binghe.

Ming-ge arrives last with some food that looks like it was just bought from the restaurant across the street, which Shen Yuan isn't going to protest; even though he can't eat it, Ming-ge brings his favorite spring rolls, and Shen Yuan can enjoy them even if it's through watching Chengle eat them with pleasure.

Airplane tries to stay out of the way; however, when his mother meets him and Airplane introduces himself as Shang Honghua, his voice low and shy, mentioning that he currently works as a writer and studied accounting for a few semesters before dropping out due to high tuition costs, his mother seems *charmed* by him. She sits him next to her at the dinner table, peppering him with questions that can border on the invasive, but Airplane manages to answer very well, gaining the full affection and approval of "Mama Shen," as Airplane has been calling her nonstop, in a limbo between terror and affection.

“This table has been the fullest it’s been in years,” says his mother, as Meimei and Ming-ge finish placing all the dishes on the table. His mother clearly looks excited, and not just by the food, with sparkling eyes and a radiant face. It’s nice to see her so happy, Shen Yuan thinks. “I hope it always stays that way.”

“As long as you don’t pester our guests with so many questions, darling,” his father says, caressing her hand on the table, and his mother snorts, rolling her eyes. Still, her face flushes a little.

“Aiya, come on, our dear A-Shang doesn’t mind. He’s a good boy,” she coos, and Shen Yuan is clearly biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing as he watches Airplane’s entire face quickly turn more and *more* redder. “So clever, really, very clever! I told him about this problem we’re having at the company, honey, if you could see how quickly he solved it…!”

“Mom,” Meimei complains, finally sitting down. “Let’s not talk about work at the table. Not today.”

“Sure, sure,” his mother sighs, smiling. It doesn’t seem like a hard concession to do.

Dinner is going well. Shen Yuan helps Chengle serve himself all the things that catch his eye, including a large bowl of peas. He receives his broth without complaint, and tries to remain silent and grateful, listening and not intruding on conversations. Shen Yuan has managed to seat Chengle next to him, and although his left side was occupied by Ming-ge, he has been able to seat Luo Binghe on the other side of Chengle, and although the boy isn't *as* happy, it could be worse. Luo Binghe could have ended up sitting next to Shen Jiu, and God help him, Shen Yuan *could* have ended up sitting next to Shen Jiu.

Luo Binghe only speaks when someone asks directly at him, which is also… fine. Luo Binghe is charming when his father asks—even when Shen Yuan clearly despairs that he shouldn’t—what line of work he works in, where he lives, whether he travels recurrently*;* he’s not as passive-aggressive as Shen Yuan might have hoped, but Luo Binghe confirms that he’s formally settled in the city and doesn’t plan on moving too far, and he repeats this when his mother asks another similar question, and he says it again when Ming-ge asks point-blank whether he plans to leave Chengle again so they can be prepared for it if it happens.

Despite everything, Shen Yuan is pleased that his family is a united front, willing to defend Chengle's right to have his father present in his life, or far enough away to not get his hopes up or play into his head.

Airplane is a good guest: he eats a lot, showers each dish with praise, answers back and forth, bonds with Meimei, and chats a little excitedly with Ming-ge when he makes the mistake of asking him about martial arts. He vaguely mentions that he's working on some online publishing projects, vaguely enough that no one immediately assumes he's the damn hack-author of the novel Shen Yuan has been healthily obsessed with for the past year, which is probably his best move of the evening.

And Chengle is the most adorable baby. He eats with round cheeks, asks for seconds of his favorites, and talks his head off whenever Shen Yuan, Meimei, or Jiu-ge asks him something. There's the constant excitement of getting a new house, and when Meimei asks him what he'd like his new house to be like, Luo Chengle says he'd like to continue sleeping cuddling his Yuan-ge because he likes his cuddles, but he'd like a room with a huge window so he could see everything, a bookcase for storybooks, a tiny drawing table, and a soft carpeted floor where he could bask by the window like a tiger taking a sunbath. From the way his parents exchange glances, Shen Yuan can tell he already knows what they'll be buying, both of them extremely eager to spoil their newly acquired little grandson.

It could be worse.

“Yuan-ge,” Chengle gently tugged on his sleeve. “Are there any meatballs left from Uncle Yue?”

“Uh? Let me see.” Shen Yuan stretches slightly, looking at the pot Yue Qi had brought. It’s a surprise, and not at all surprising, that there isn’t a single one left in the pot; Yue Qi might not be good at cooking Asian dishes—always too spicy or overseasoned—but he has quite an excellent handle on foreign food, especially meats and pasta. Which is funny, given that he’s living with someone who doesn’t enjoy eating either of those, sticking to the more traditional dishes. “Oh, sorry, dear. There’s not a single one left.”

Chengle pouts a little, but doesn't really protest, starting to reach out with chopsticks to pick up another one of the pork dumplings that Meimei bought. Then, it comes as a huge surprise to Chengle—and to Shen Yuan, and probably everyone at the table—when Luo Binghe suddenly moves his plate closer to Chengle's and drops here three round, untouched meatballs off his own plate.

Shen Yuan opens his mouth to say something, then closes it. Even Airplane has fallen silent, watching as almost everyone at the table looks at the meatballs on the tiny plate.

“Chengle said,” Luo Binghe says, after a brief moment of clear hesitation, “that they were his favorites. I… set some aside, in case you wanted more.”

Shen Yuan feels it almost like an electric shock. Even if it was just over a week ago, it feels like an eternity: Luo Binghe still eats at the coffee table, with the occasional standing meal in the kitchen next to Shen Yuan while he makes breakfast, or when Chengle invites him to the table for being particularly good that day (like last night's dinner, for example); but at that

time, Luo Binghe had been isolated with his own bowl of Yue Qi's reheated food and all those robes, far away, but probably not far enough away that he didn't hear Chengle say that 'Uncle Yue's' meatballs were his favorite.

Chengle's expression turns from surprise to a smile, much wider and brighter than any he's ever given his father. Luo Binghe seems to notice, from the way his face looks stunned, as if he too is being swept away by the warmth of that sweet, radiant face.

“Thank you, Father!” says Chengle, without Shen Yuan asking him to and without Luo Binghe being able to say anything else, quickly stabbing one of the meatballs with a chopstick and beginning to nibble on it as if it were a skewer.

Even his mother is too shocked to scold him for his manners. Despite everything, the look she gives Luo Binghe is a *tiny bit of* approval before returning to the conversation with Airplane, which he interrupts a couple of times with awkward sounds and coughs before returning to what he was saying.

“You heard him,” Shen Yuan says quietly. He knows he doesn’t have to raise his voice too much for Luo Binghe to hear him, even with a child in between, and he nods, going back to his own food. Luo Binghe has stuck to what he’d made himself, only accepting dumplings from Meimei and some mapo tofu brought by Shen Yuan’s mother when Shen Yuan has given him a warning look, seeing him ready to refuse his mother’s home-cooked food. “I didn’t think you’d be… paying this much attention.”

Luo Binghe shrugs. He seems to want to appear indifferent to this, but when Shen Yuan looks at him, he can notice that his ears are red. Ah, wow! Look at the big and powerful Demon Emperor embarrassed for paying attention to his son!

“Oh,” Shen Yuan says suddenly, reaching behind Chengle’s chair to poke his finger between Luo Binghe’s ribs. Luo Binghe tries very hard not to flinch, so Shen Yuan has to bite back the smile forming on his face before it gets *too big*. “So *that’s why* you thought his favorite dumplings were beef ones. Because he mentioned these meatballs as his favorite.”

Luo Binghe doesn't give a verbal reply, shrinking back as if he wants to continue eating undisturbed. With that alone, Shen Yuan is too pleased with himself, even eating only his broth and purees.

“Anyway, I find it unfair,” Meimei is complaining on the other end, talking to Jiu-ge. Shen Yuan can’t keep up with all the conversations at the table, so he has no idea what Meimei finds unfair. He’s sure it’s not the result of the martial arts competition that Ming-ge is telling his father about, who, like a saint, listens as always without objection or telling him that it’s too much. “I mean, you have that big apartment perfectly adequate! I don’t believe it. Fuck it.”

“Language,” Jiu-ge chides, probably before his mother has to interrupt their conversation to do so. “Anyway, I expected it. Technically and *legally,* I’m single, and I’m in a *suspicious cohabitation* with this big fool,” and he jerks his thumb at Yue-ge, who discreetly sips from his glass with a complacent expression. “I didn’t expect it to be resolved immediately, but I didn’t expect them to put up *so many* objections in the first stages, either.”

“I suggested to Xiao Jiu that he can marry one of those girls who works for him to get a better position in the lists,” Yue Qi says, a smile spreading across his face that doesn’t reach his eyes. Shen Yuan has no idea why any of this is relevant, or even what they’re talking about, but he doesn’t think it’s anything Yue Qi seems to like as much as his gentle smile suggests. “Maybe Lan Chang, the secretary? It would be good for her, so she can put her son in a better school.”

“Let his damn father be in charge of paying more child support so she can pay for a better school. I swear if I find out that fucking bastard went back to those archery competitions in the mountains instead of giving her more money for the little brat…” Shen Jiu protests, clearly indignant; so clearly indignant that he swallows the acidic glare his mother gives him at his swearing with a gulp of something that surely isn’t soda. He sighs, and Shen Yuan, not for the first time, notices how exhausted he looks. “I appreciate the concern, Qi-ge. I won’t.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Meimei protests. Her mouth twists, and she speaks only a little more quietly, glancing alludingly at her mother. Shen Yuan, only because he’s already paying attention, can hear over Airplane’s babble and Ming-ge’s account of the fights. “So… what do you think about going to the United States? You’ll have fewer legal obstacles there, won’t you?”

“And leave Mom and…?” Jiu-ge gives Shen Yuan a pointed look, flinching when he realizes Shen Yuan is looking in his direction. He looks away from him as if his mere gaze burns. Well, Shen Yuan has been ignored by Jiu-ge on his birthday once, Christmas is *nothing*. “She wouldn’t forgive me. Neither would I forgive myself for leaving.”

“She could handle it,” Meimei protests, still quietly, though she doesn’t sound entirely convinced. “I mean… it would be best, wouldn’t it?”

“Run away,” Jiu-ge protests, his mouth twisting when he realizes his glass is already empty. He doesn’t even have to ask before Yue Qi is already pouring it again, and yes, that sparkling wine is clearly not soda with fruit juice. “This is what they forced on us. To run away and scurry like rats just for the sake of the minimum standard of living. How *humiliating*.”

“It wouldn’t be so bad,” Yue Qi says, his voice *trying* to be uplifting. Judging by Shen Jiu’s sour face, Yue Qi’s smile is definitely making his mood worse. “We could get a nice loft and take advantage of establishing the company on a roll in America. There are so many good opportunities these days. It will probably be difficult at first, but we can get a handle on the language and…”

“And what?” Shen Jiu protests. His upper lip is actually lifted in a grimace of distaste that even reveals his teeth. “It will take us *at least* two years to position the company as active and main player in the market here. We’ll be working from home offices on the other side of the world until we find a secure position in the States. Not to mention racism, ethnic discrimination, my God, there are states where we can’t even…” Shen Jiu sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. He’s even put his glass aside. “It will take at least three or four years until *we have* verifiable stability, residency, and employment to even think about adoption. That’s *too* long. I’m not exactly getting young.”

Shen Yuan stands there, frozen, holding his spoon. *Adoption?* Wait, *wait*. Was that whole mess Jiu-ge was thinking about moving to America about because of the damn adoption? What the hell? All because he got rejected for that cat? Shen Yuan has no idea why he'd go to such extremes—

"And, you know," Meimei lowers her voice *so much* that even Shen Yuan has difficulty hearing it. "Have you thought about surrogacy?"

… what.

"Hell no," Shen Jiu says immediately. "It's fucking illegal here, whether I like it or not. The scandal it would throw on the family if it got out to the press, God. And even then, when I have to register the baby with the *hukou,* they'd clearly open a case *against me,* against us. Rich, single, suspicious cohabitation, and now registering a baby as my newborn without a mother present? I'd be lucky if they *only* sent a social worker and not the police."

Shen Yuan is lucky that his spoon lands close enough to the plate to only splash him. It doesn't make too much of a noise, and only Chengle is startled beside him, looking at him with wide, worried eyes and the corner of his mouth full of sauce.

"Yuan-ge," he whispers. "Is Yuan-ge okay? Does it hurt again?" he asks, his big eyes shining, and Shen Yuan can do nothing but shake his head, quickly taking a napkin to wipe the corner of the boy's mouth on both sides.

"I'm fine, baby," he says quickly. "My hand just went limp. That's all."

It's not difficult for him to fake it. In fact, his fingers feel limp and numb at the same time, his head buzzing as if a giant hornet's nest had just been disturbed. The realization that hits him is equal parts overwhelming and chaotic, making him shake a little to the bone and a little almost tear out his insides in the most horrendous feeling of nausea.

Shit. *Shit.* Jiu-ge had never been talking about adopting another damn cat, he'd been told that, and Shen Yuan had been stupid enough to tell him…

Oh fuck.

Fuck.

Shen Yuan immediately loses his appetite. Still, he forces himself to smile, to converse when asked, and to pretend his knees aren't weak. It's abrupt, ridiculous, and almost hysterical, but Shen Yuan knows he's not entirely wrong to feel like the worst piece of trash in the world at that moment, unable to even look up from his plate without hating himself terribly.

Chapter End Notes

LBG: I promise I won't flirt *with your sister* tonight
SY: Good
SY: ...I feel like there's a slight subtext I'm not quite getting there

LBG: Ah, Yuan-ge, cruel and mean Yuan-ge, making me bear children for him without even getting married-
SY: ???????!!?!??!?!???!??!?!?!?

THIS CHAPTER WAS EXTRA FUN TO WRITE. ESPECIALLY BECAUSE I HAD TO SPLIT IT IN TWO BECAUSE IT WAS SUDDENLY 12,000 WORDS INTO THE CHAPTER AND I HAD JUST FINISHED THE REAL FAMILY DRAMA OF THE NIGHT, which we'll see in tomorrow's chapter that continues Christmas *sip of tea* OOPSIE, CHARACTERS FROM ANOTHER MXTX NOVEL SHOWING IN THE WILD IF YOU SQUINT BECAUSE I FOUND IT EXTREMELY FUNNY

Airplane arrived, was adorable, and now has a new mom. Say hello to honorary son Shen. It won't take long for him to be relocated to a "temporary" job, sorting things out here and there, he'll have a new apartment rent-free, and who knows if Mama Shen will even get him an editor and a publicist so he can write what he truly loves without caring what the public says about it :'D
I like making my hamster boy happy, I'm not going to apologize for that

Bingge saw an opportunity to be shameless and TAKE IT. The problem is, now that he's thought about it, he won't be able to get it out of his mind. It's going to be a new level of psychological torture that will haunt his dreams and nightmares equally. I mean, what a milf SY is, Bingge wouldn't have a problem giving him all the babies in the world. Gender? What is gender? Of course Bingge will be able to get pregnant with the babies so milf Shen Yuan can spoil them, nothing unusual there
..... no, there won't be mpreg in this fic. I mean, Bingge is just going to joke about it a lot because now that he said it and got a GREAT reaction from SY, he won't stop saying it. Besides, he's not physically capable of restraining himself from being shameless :P .... and also because it amuses me a lot

YEAH BOY, SY HAD HIS REVELATION. Just a little. The good roommates Qijiu who are thinking about adopting a child. Little by little, Rome wasn't built in a day, etc. Well done SY, you've realized the enormous stupidity that came out of your mouth. Time to make things right (or make them worse, knowing you, who knows)

AAAAAA THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING, YOU KNOW, IT MAKES ME SO HAPPY TO BE ON THIS JOURNEY WITH YOU. I LOVE IT AND I LOVE YOU SO MUCH. I HAVE SO MUCH FUN EVERY TIME. You've exponentially improved my mental health. This literally started as a manic episode where I would write practically all day, sleep 2-3 hours, listen to the same song on loop, and couldn't get out of this weird, chaotic corner I was in, only with a specific hyperfixation where straying from it made me feel physically ill. Now... I think I'm out of there, halfway, but this stays with me and fills me up when everything gets chaotic, and I have no way to thank you for HOW HUGE this is to me and how much you all mean. THANK YOU!!!!

Okay, okay, LOTS OF feelings. I'M SORRY. I HOPE YOU REALLY LIKED AND EJOYED THE CHAPTER. CHRISTMAS DOESN'T END TODAY! It's a few months early for us, but hey, sorry, sometimes there are dates that I can't control that have to pass when I just want snow in my fic. Anyway. You know, KUDO-COMMENT-INTERACTION, I'M HAPPY TO SHARE ALL OF THIS WITH YOU, THANK YOU VERY MUCH!!!!
SEE YOU SOON :3

Chapter 20: A Christmas tears

Chapter Notes

HEY HELLO!!!!! I'll take it easy this week, see you every other day again :P Nothing serious or anything you have to worry about, I very promise. I'm just a lot sleepier because changed my meds on Friday, and I think my body is saying, "Hey, bitch, what's it like to bad adjusting to new psychotropic?" anyway, I hope that fixes my *vague hand movement* inherent emotional chaos that I've already ruled out as not hormonal :B

Chapter warnings: strong verbal arguments, medication dependency issues, clear mentions of untreated depression, passive suicidal ideation if you squint

Enjoy the chapter ;D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Ming-ge and his father are cleaning the dishes and Jiu-ge sneaks off to smoke on the balcony, far enough away from the rest of the family that his mother doesn't sigh sadly and Chengle isn't even remotely affected by the smoke, Shen Yuan follows him as discreetly as he can (which, surely, isn't much).

“What the hell? Get inside, you’ll freeze,” Jiu-ge growls, pushing the cigarette as far away from Shen Yuan as he can as he follows him out onto the balcony. “You’re going to get sick, and you *just* got out of the hospital. What the fuck? Did you want my attention so badly today that-?”

“I’m sorry,” Shen Yuan says, so fast that the words burn in his mouth. Shen Jiu closes his mouth so hard his teeth click together with an audible sound. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

“You have too much to apologize for,” Shen Jiu says, then pushes him back. “But stay inside. You’re going to get sick again, and I’m *not* going to deal with that.”

There isn't much wind, but the air is chilly, and with each word the steam that escapes Shen Yuan's mouth is almost as thick as Shen Jiu's cigar smoke. Shen Yuan steps back, sheltering on the inside of the glass, chilly against his bones, waiting for Shen Jiu's final hurried drags before he stubs out the glass and tosses the cigarette butt into his portable ashtray. As soon as he's inside the study too—Shen Yuan wasn't going to talk to him through the glass like he's a damn prisoner—Shen Jiu rolls his eyes.

“Has the American Christmas ghosts hit you or…?”

“I said something *horrible*,” Shen Yuan says quickly, causing Jiu-ge to close his mouth again. If it were another time, a different situation, Shen Yuan might even gloat that he’s left him

speechless twice in one night. “I… was an idiot. I didn’t think it through. I didn’t believe what I was saying could sound the way it did, and it only hit me tonight. And I’m sorry.”

Shen Jiu crosses his arms over his chest. The look he gives to him is more disapproving and disappointed than angry.

“Oh, no?” he says, though. It’s nice that he hasn’t turned around and left until now, so Shen Yuan figures *they* can work this out, if only Jiu-ge is willing to listen. “So what did you think it sounded like?”

“Not like something that could *really* hurt you,” Shen Yuan quickly replies. His arm where he’s holding onto the cane is shaking, and Shen Jiu just snorts before pushing him onto a small, nearby armchair to sit down. “I didn’t mean to… I really didn’t. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing,” Shen Jiu snaps, his face twisting. “Apologies, *apologies*. What good are your apologies to me? They are useless” he splutters. It’s more sulking than angry, and Shen Yuan would be relieved if it were just another conversation. “*Explain yourself*.”

“I have no explanation, no excuse,” Shen Yuan says quickly, because saying that he’d been thinking it was a cat all along would surely make Shen Jiu slap him for real. Or laugh in his face. And honestly, Shen Yuan didn’t think he knew which was worse. “I’m just… I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Shen Jiu rolls his eyes. His bad mood seems to have worsened exponentially.

“But *you did it,*” Shen Jiu says, so coldly it hurts. “Congratulations on discovering that your words can be hurtful trash, you little shit. Stop apologizing, because I won’t be forgiving you anytime soon. *Explain yourself*, or I’ll leave you here and take your cane so you can’t follow me.”

“Hey,” Shen Yuan grimaces, gripping the cane with both hands. He has no doubt Shen Jiu would do it. He’s had at least three previous experiences where Jiu-ge has. Then, he sighs deeply. “Look, it hasn’t been… easy days. Okay? I was frustrated, I was angry, and I took it out on you just because… part of my frustration is because you’re shit to me, too,” and he raises his hand, silencing Shen Jiu who’s now ready to speak. “I know you don’t *mean* to. I know you want to take care of me and all. But it makes me doubly sick when I’m feeling my worst, and I hate that you control me like I can’t take care of myself.”

“Because you can’t take care of yourself!” Shen Jiu protests at the top of his lungs. Once he starts, as always, he *can’t be* kept quiet. “You ended up in the hospital for taking more medication than you should. You refuse to accept professional mental health help, which you *clearly* need, because you can’t even *acknowledge* that you have a problem. You adopted a child that you *illegally* kidnapped from his father, and now you have that damn burden asshole living in your apartment and playing house like he belongs *there*. Of course I’m furious that you can’t do something as basic as accept that you need help! You think that’s easy?!”

“No one asked you to…” Shen Yuan begins, but Jiu-ge silences him with a hiss.

“Oh, sure, why doesn't Ming-ge do it instead? Do you really think he’d remember to contact your doctors to check on their availability, renew your prescriptions, schedule appointments with new specialists, and find out which are the best specialists who might be able to help you? Oh, let Dad or Mom do it. They’ll surely have time in their busy schedules to continue caring for their sickly child like they’ve done all their lives. After all, they brought you into the world. It’s only natural that they can’t have a life because they have to keep taking care of you!” With each word, Shen Yuan bites his tongue, a fierce anguish creeping into his throat, almost a scream, as he tries to control the force with which he does so because he *doesn’t want* to end up with blood in his mouth. Not again. “Meimei, maybe? Do you think she’d get you into an advertising campaign with a pharmaceutical company that…?”

“*I* can take care of *myself*,” Shen Yuan hisses. He feels his face burning. It’s more than embarrassment, it’s a humiliation that hits him in the neck, turning his face red, filling his eyes with tears. It doesn’t make sense. Nothing makes sense, not tonight, not in front of Jiu-ge, who has never stopped looking at him like he’s the child he could never stop overprotecting. He was supposed to just apologize! They weren’t going to fucking argue! “I’m *twenty-five*. I’m a legal adult and fully capable of making my own doctor’s appointments, getting my own medications, ensuring *my* health enough to—”

Shen Jiu lets out a laugh so sharp it's worse than a slap. Shen Yuan expected it to be, anyway.

“Of course, how *foolish* of me,” Shen Jiu says, his expression so exhausted it’s almost pathetic. Shen Yuan can see, in the distant pale light, every angle of his face, that exhausted expression on his face. It’s… it’s like the corpse in his nightmare, so like it for a moment that Shen Yuan feels a shiver of dread run down his spine. “You can take care of yourself just like you’ve been lately, being so responsible with yourself, with your health, with your schedule, with your diet, with your medications. How could I not have *thought* of that? You sure know how to do it *so well* on your own, ending up in the emergency room on the verge of *dying* from a damn dependency problem you refuse to accept.”

“I don’t have any dependency problem to accept,” Shen Yuan snarls, rolling his eyes and ignoring Shen Jiu’s mordant, humorless laugh. “I’ve had busier days, taken more painkillers to have a normal life for a fucking while. That’s it. I used to have no reason to get out of the damn bed, do you think taking care of a child is *easy* when it hurts to even breathe?” he hisses.

And Shen Yuan, just like Shen Jiu, once he starts talking it’s like turning on a tap: the water runs with a ferocity he hadn’t even been aware of until then. The hurtful things from his brother’s mouth aren’t so much plunging a knife as painfully tearing out wounds that have been there for a long, long time.

“Chengle arrived, and *I love him*” Shen Yuan hisses. His own voice sounds more tired than angry. *“*Every day, I have a *purpose* to get out of bed and do *something.* But do you think it was *easy* when my body was used to being from bed to chair to chair to bed all day? What else could I do? Shit! The first night I set the table for Chengle was the first fucking night I set the table instead of eating at my desk or in bed. My body wasn’t used to *any* of that! And yes, I kept demanding my body because he deserved *more* than that! What did you want me to do?”

“That you should get help to understand that *you* also deserve more than that, shit!” Shen Jiu replies. He runs his hands through his hair, tousling it back. He even pushes his square glasses off his face, rubbing his eyes with a hand that looks shaky. “If your weak body can’t handle the pain, don’t take any more painkillers, *give yourself a fucking break.* Get help. You have a family, *I am* your family, we could have helped you, you could have trusted us instead of continuing to avoid us because you-…”

And now it's Shen Jiu who interrupts, pressing his lips into a thin line before finishing twisting the knife against his wounds, before opening them and letting the blood fall. Shen Yuan snorts.

“Why can’t I keep up with you?” He points at his cane, placing a hand on his chest. “*Sure*. Yes, of course it’s *easy* having to watch you all do *so much,* relying on you when you have such busy, joy-filled lives. Ming-ge doesn’t go a single damn month without leaving the city or, God willing, the country for his competitions; he can’t keep making excuses that they’re company trips; no one believes him. Meimei is China’s elite nepobaby, a brand ambassador, and yet she continues to be hired by foreign brands that don’t even know her nepobaby reputation just because she is pretty and charming and does her job *good*. *And you*! You’re the star of the family company, the prosperous future heir to everything, and Yue-ge is so brilliant, every one of you is so *brilliant*!” And when his voice cracks, only then does Shen Yuan notice the stupid tears streaming down his face. He wipes them with the sleeve of his sweater. Great. *Another* family dinner of tears. How pathetic. Shen Yuan was sure he needed a few more hours of sleep for this. “I’m not resentful *or* just irrationally jealous, Jiu-ge. I *know*. I know where I stand in this family, I know what my expectations are, what *your* expectations are. I know how miserable I’ll be until the day I *die*. But facing it doesn’t mean it won’t *hurt* to force myself to stay behind so that when I finally die, you won’t have to suffer so much,” he hisses at the end.

Shen Jiu stands there, looking at him. He just stares, breathing, still, his body moving only as he inhales and exhales. His shoulders are slumped, and his head is tilted to one side. If Shen Yuan didn't have his own wet eyes, too blurry to see clearly, he'd almost say Jiu-ge was crying too.

“You’re *so* depressed it’s hard to see you,” Shen Jiu says, and he feels even harder than if he’d kicked him. And then, without any humor, his shoulders shake with a laugh that seems to split him. It’s also hard to see. “Seriously, Yuan-di. Why are you supposed to be so like me? It’s not *fair*. Sometimes I think I’m arguing with a mirror.”

“I’m not some controlling, megalomaniacal bitch who gets stressed if he’s not in control of everything and everyone around him,” Shen Yuan mutters, but even as he says it, he feels like there’s less venom in his voice. His ears, eyes, and throat are burning, and he’s sure at least one of those three things is from the cold air that seeped in from the balcony. He crosses his fingers and prays he *doesn’t* get sick from it alone. “I was supposed to apologize to you, and we ended up arguing. Again.”

“Yes,” Jiu-ge says. He leans against his Meimei’s desk, which is littered with papers and odds and ends, and Shen Yuan is glad that one aisle away there’s music playing, cartoons on TV, and chatter loud enough that no one has overheard or intervened… yet. Luo Binghe has

probably heard them, but Shen Yuan is sure he hears *everything* all the time and chooses to ignore it unless he particularly cares. And he doubts a stupid argument between brothers could ever matter enough. “I *don’t* forgive you. But you can work on your forgiveness by going to that therapist your doctor recommended.”

“Ugh,” Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. “No, thank you. I’d rather live under your eternal rejection and contempt.”

“Good, because I reject you so much right now,” Shen Jiu says, and even in his most cutting tone, Shen Yuan is sure he doesn’t mean it. Shen Jiu moves closer; there’s no hesitation in his steps, nor any hesitation as he slumps against the wall beside him now, staring at him. “I’m worried about you. I know it must be… unpleasant to have your medication restricted. But how did you expect me to react? Clearly, I can’t trust you with your own health.”

“You’ve never wanted to trust me with my own health,” Shen Yuan mumbles. He feels too tired to argue further, but not exhausted enough to sulk.

“When you were ten, you sprained your ankle getting into a fight while someone was bullying that kid you didn’t even like,” Shen Jiu enumerates, raising his fingers as he talks. “When you were twelve, you gave your inhaler to that kid on the library because he had an asthma attack, and then when you got one attack that same afternoon, you ended up in the hospital. When you were thirteen, you skipped all your meds for a whole week…”

“I thought they were placebos,” Shen Yuan complains, embarrassed. It's one of the worst stories his family has to tell, at least about him. “Mom had talked about placebos, she shut up when I came in, and I thought…”

“Yeah, we all know what you thought,” Shen Jiu rolls his eyes. “What I mean is, you don’t have a good track record of knowing how to take care of yourself, or even knowing *how to* prioritize yourself or your health. It’s a surprise you can take such good care of Chengle.” Then, he grimaces. “Well, it isn’t. You’ve always been able to give more to others than to yourself.”

“Why do things that should be a compliment sound like an insult when you say them?” Shen Yuan protests. And Shen Jiu just lets out a sullen, low laugh.

They both fall silent. It's a silence that tugs at the edges, like the sting of a healing wound—too close to reopening, too close to becoming infected, with inflammation and still a tension that surges with every movement, a burning sensation impossible to ignore. It's as if they're trapped in a bubble: a long hallway beyond, far from the beautiful studio where Meimei probably makes her most important brand videos, his family mingles, celebrates, and shares. Shen Yuan just… hopes Airplane is taking lots of photos of Chengle.

He also knows they won't get anywhere tonight. Arguing with Jiu-ge is like walking in circles, blaming each other over and over again for the same thing, throwing the same old issues in each other's faces over and over again.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats. Even to Shen Yuan, it sounds hollow. “I really am. From what I said. I…” and he grimaces, “I think you’ll be a great father. You’ve taken care of me far more

times than either of *us* would have liked. As long as you're not a control freak over your future son, or daughter, well. It'll be good. You'll do good."

Shen Jiu doesn't look back. He stares at a fixed point, motionless, with what seem to be shallow breaths. Shen Yuan lets him be. It's not like he expects much from his brother right now.

"I'll forgive you only if you agree to therapy," Shen Jiu says. Shen Yuan is already opening his mouth to protest, but Shen Jiu smacks him on the arm. It doesn't sting, but it's a clear warning that Shen Jiu has *never* had a problem fighting with him physically, even when he had a cane as a teen. Sometimes they've even *bitten each other*... and it was still less brotherly violence than Ming-ge and Jiu-ge had had against each other. "Just one session. Try it, and if you don't like it at all, hate it, and abhor it, you can drop it, and I won't press the issue."

Shen Yuan sighs deeply. He nods. He supposes it's the closest the two of them have come to a mutual agreement in… years, if he's honest with himself.

"Just one session," he agrees. "And if he quotes Freud, I'll get up and leave."

"Oh, I would too," Shen Jiu says, clearly wincing in disgust. They both find themselves laughing a little, quietly. Shen Yuan rubs his face with his sleeve, brushing away the last traces of tears, and perhaps just in time, because a small face covered in kiss marks that *weren't* there at dinnertime peeks around Meimei's study door.

"Are Yuan-ge and Jiu-ge done fighting?" he asks in his small voice. Shen Yuan, despite everything, laughs. He pats his side, and Luo Chengle runs to be hugged. "I don't like fighting. Aren't you going to hurt each other? With knives or poison?"

"God, what movies have you been putting on for this kid?" Shen Jiu complains, huffing. He straightens up and, as he passes him, pats his curly little head. "No, little brat. Your Uncle Jiu and Baba Yuan haven't been using knives or poison. If they were using knives and poison, they wouldn't have been shouting at each other. Next time, your Uncle Jiu will remember to get some of those and save himself a lot of shouting."

"And you encourage it," Shen Yuan complains, but he finds humor in his own voice. He carefully hugs Chengle to his side, wiping away the kiss marks with his sleeve as best he can. Given the red color and the intensity of the stains, coupled with how difficult it is to remove them dry, he's almost certain it was his mother's. "Aiya, look at that face. Did you tell your Nainai that the buns your Uncle Airplane brought were the ones she can take, not your cheeks? She looks like she took a good bite."

"She can't eat my cheeks!" Chengle squishes his cheeks with his tiny hands, looking absolutely adorable. "Nainai gave lots of loud kisses! And she took lots of photos. Does Yuan-ge want to see them?"

"Always," Shen Yuan says. Then he glances at Shen Jiu, who's standing by the door waiting for him. He sighs. Well… drama, crying, and all, their arguments never last forever. "Have

you started exchanging gifts yet? I want to know what I'm getting this year, besides my cute little baby."

Chengle squirms as Shen Yuan tickles his sides. His laughter gives Shen Yuan both courage and a desire to continue the evening, so he uses that momentum to stand up, ready to return to the family.

"Come on, come on!" Chengle jumps up and down. "I want to see the gifts. Nainai said she has three! Three different! Just for me!"

Shen Yuan follows him. Shen Jiu follows them both, closing the door behind them, determined to finish the night as peacefully as possible after all. It's not as if they don't do this every year; in fact, it's better: doing it at Christmas wouldn't mean as much, and their differences would probably be smoothed over enough that by the time the real New Year's celebration comes around, they won't have *too much* to argue about.

It was probably for the best. Shen Jiu will leave that night with a well-deserved apology, and Shen Yuan will… well, *shit*, with a fucking therapist.

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

The Shen family's gift-giving dynamic is an entertaining one, in Shen Yuan's opinion. To prevent anyone from pretending to like or dislike a gift, the gifts are opened first, and then the gift-giver appears. Shen Yuan has many amusing memories of his siblings accidentally offending their mother by saying horrible things about gifts they thought were from grandparents or family friends, only to find out they were lovingly given by their beloved mother. A lesson in gratitude, accepting, not demanding, etc. Shen Yuan had always considered this to be a pleasant thing.

"Wow!" Meimei clearly acts surprised as she opens the gift, a gorgeous and stylized dress. It's a pretty, sparkly midnight blue and appears to be embroidered with stars. It has long, fitted sleeves and is an incredibly beautiful thing. Shen Yuan knows nothing about fashion, but from what he's learned through osmosis from living with Meimei in his teenage years, he can tell how beautifully it's made. Only when his father raises his hand does Meimei give him the brightest smile: "Dad, I love it!"

"Honey, you chose it," his father says, and Meimei bursts out laughing again, clearly proud of herself. "But I'm glad you like it. It's perfect for the charity gala tomorrow."

"What's a charity gala?" asks Chengle, sitting on the floor, staring at the sparkles on Meimei's dress with wonder in his eyes. Just as Shen Yuan had guessed, he has a large, plush tiger that doubles as a nap blanket. A total cutie, Shen Yuan opines.

"An event where the family invites a lot of wealthy people, and we have them donate some of that money to help people who don't have," Shen Yuan explains, leaning in slightly. Chengle nods, his little mouth forming a playful 'o,' and then nods his head even faster.

"I understand! That's nice!" he says, and claps his hands. His mother laughs fondly, and even Ming-ge, who has exhausted his social battery and is in the far corner, is smiling a little at

him. “And you give them money? So they buy food and go to the doctor and aren’t hungry and are happy?”

“It’s a little more difficult than that,” Shen Yuan says, thinking briefly about how to explain it. Then, with a slightly vengeful smile, he turns to Jiu-ge: “Your Uncle Jiu has organized many of these. Why doesn’t he explain it to you?”

The look Shen Jiu gives him would probably make someone less emotionally prepared for it pee themselves. Shen Yuan keeps smiling; after a tense and annoying discussion, it's not like Shen Jiu can make him feel bad just by giving him just a cruel look.

Still, it's not a challenge Shen Jiu seems unwilling to meet. He takes his time and tries to explain as best he can in simple terms, while Yue Qi is now the one unwrapping a gift, laughing when he finds tiny cat sweaters, clearly a gift from ‘Mama Shen’ for her first-born granddaughter. Shen Yuan sighs, slumping a little against the back of the couch.

“Is Yuan-ge feeling very tired already?” Luo Binghe asks in a low voice. They’re sitting on the same couch so Shen Yuan can get up easily later, but closer to the end, with a considerable distance between Luo Binghe and where Meimei had been sitting, leaving Airplane and Shen Yuan’s mother almost elbow to elbow on the other side. Shen Yuan shakes his head, watching Airplane unwrap a package with his name on it, staring with wide, surprised eyes at the ice-blue keyboard with its soft, light-pressure keys so as not to strain his tendons while typing, and looking at all the faces, not knowing who to thank. Only when Shen Yuan rolls his eyes does Airplane seem to start to look on the verge of tears.

“Normal,” Shen Yuan excuses himself. Meimei reaches for another gift in the pile, throwing it directly at Shen Jiu, who has the misfortune to accidentally throw it at Ming-ge, who obviously takes it as a provocation and stands up, ready to resolve the situation with violence. Shen Yuan bites the edge of his fingernail, chuckling when his father has to intervene, putting Ming-ge in a restraint headlock to keep him from attacking Jiu-ge, while Yue Qi pretends not to be laughing so hard. “They’re overwhelming.”

“They are,” Luo Binghe says, his tone strangely hesitant. And then: “Yuan-ge’s family… this one… *I* didn’t know families could be like *this*.”

Shen Yuan hums; he knows there are no good family experiences for Luo Binghe, and he is both happy and proud to be able to demonstrate and make him part of such a different and pleasant experience. Luo Chengle goes ahead and opens the gift for Shen Jiu, overly enthusiastic about tearing papers and ripping things, and Shen Jiu has a smile that is not malicious as he lifts up a number of different cloth bags with many different tea leaves, with a curious expression.

“Wow,” he hums, taking them out of the packaging Shen Yuan had put them in. He’s grateful they weren’t glass, but he also believes Meimei wouldn’t have thrown something glass, especially not at an unsuspecting Shen Jiu. “Tea leaves. What a surprise, because of course no one here knows I like tea or what else to get me. I wonder—”

He leans closer to smell one of the small bags filled with different blends of ground leaves, a crooked smile spreading across his face. Then, suddenly, he stills. His expression freezes. He

blinks once, twice, three times, studying the cloth bags filled with herbs. It's not as if he's upset, or thoughtful. It's more as if his expression has completely emptied.

“Xiao Jiu?” Yue Qi asks, leaning towards him with a worried look. “Are you okay?”

Shen Yuan clears his throat, slightly uncomfortable.

“Well, I’m sorry if the blends are unpleasant,” he quickly excused himself. He’d been too hesitant about what to give Jiu-ge. He’d had good luck the previous years: books, a tea set, a new teapot, a few decorative collectible fans. Nonsense. Only when he rummaged through the stash of herbs and medicines Mu Qingfang had brought and found many tea blends that, according to Luo Binghe, were just blends of tea leaves and flowers that might have relaxing effects or aid in better rest and recovery, did he think he could perhaps bless his brother with some xianxia sleep. Shen Jiu really did seem too haggard lately. “A friend of a friend made these. Uh. He makes some blends, so…”

Shen Jiu's hand trembles. His eyes look *almost* watery.

“Are they *that* bad?” Shen Yuan complained, grimacing. Well, *he didn’t really know* much about tea, but he hadn’t thought they smelled that bad. It was quite a strong smell, yes, but…

“Thanks,” Shen Jiu says, and even Meimei makes a dramatic strangled noise. Shen Yuan would roll his eyes if Shen Jiu weren’t avoiding his gaze, scanning the various cloth bags. There’s a strange, too weird expression on his pale face as he turns to Yue Qi and offers one of the cloth bags for him to sniff, as if he were showing a toy to a dog by holding it up to its snout. “Look, Qi-ge. What do you think? Good enough for our standards?”

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes at the end. Yue Qi doesn't seem to be bothered by the smell, other than muttering that they could surely have some good bedtime tea if they used the old porcelain set. Judging by the way Shen Jiu is clutching the bags of tea mixes, he doesn't seem at all inclined to let them go.

The gifts continue. His mother receives a photo album from Shen Yuan, compiling his favorite photos of Chengle, along with a carefully curated copy of the 100 Days of Chengle sent by Liu Mingyan, which brings silent tears to her eyes, her mouth curling into a tender smile. His father receives a very elegant watch from Yue Qi and Shen Jiu, and Shen Yuan doesn't even consider the number of different martial arts-related items Ming-ge receives, now sulking after being caught in a headlock by his own father.

“And another one for cute boy Chengle!” says Meimei, looking at the name on one of the packages. Luo Chengle hops up from where he’s been playing with his new two tigers—an adult tiger and a baby tiger with magnets in their paws so they can hold hands (absolutely adorable, in Shen Yuan’s eyes)—and takes a medium-sized box into her hands. He jumps up and down with joy, tearing through the pile of papers, his joy suspended only for a moment when he finds a sewn-together book, so old-looking that Shen Yuan gives Luo Binghe a single warning glance before leaning over Chengle, curious.

“How about that, darling?” Shen Yuan asks, trying to add some encouragement to his voice. Luo Chengle seems reluctant to open it, probably coming to the same conclusion as Shen

Yuan, but when he does open it, he gasps. Shen Yuan doesn't gasp, but he feels like his eyes might as well fall out.

The book opens, and right on the first page, a bunch of paper and ink shapes fold together. Shen Yuan has seen pop-up books in his life, and he's sure Chengle has at least five different ones from all the stories he received from his new pampering uncles, but this one is *so* carefully made it's almost a piece of craftsmanship.

"Wow," his mother said, breaking the silence, looking at Luo Binghe curiously. "You did it?"

Luo Binghe shakes his head.

"His mother," he explains, as Chengle touches the edges. "She… has been in very poor health lately. When a… relative of mine brought the story to her, she wanted to do it."

The image on the paper is a delicate and detailed thing, but it has familiar imagery: a duckling with a crown, able to move across the paper that emulates the lake.

"It's my story!" Chengle says suddenly, turning the next page. And there are all the other familiar pictures: The Grumpy Toad, The Sleepy Hare, The Chattering Flower… Each page has the tale painstakingly detailed, written in flawless calligraphy, in all the words Luo Chengle had invented, crafted so carefully that Shen Yuan's fingers itch to not have the book safely stored away. "I created it! It's mine!"

There are a number of huge emotions coursing through Luo Chengle; arguably, they're far more than his small body can handle, because he's trembling, breathing rapidly, with bright eyes and red cheeks, but he doesn't look like he's about to cry, and while he doesn't look like he's about to laugh out loud either, he looks somewhere in between.

Then Luo Chengle finally looks at his father. Shen Yuan doesn't know who to look at: Luo Binghe, or Chengle, but he sees Chengle's little face when he asks, "Did Mom like my story?"

Luo Binghe smiles. It's the tiny smile that arrives before Luo Binghe realizes it's there, Shen Yuan notes. It's a *genuine* smile.

"She loved it," Luo Binghe says gently. "Perhaps you can read it to me tonight, before sleep? And I'll tell you what I think."

Luo Chengle nods his little head. His eyes sparkle, and Shen Yuan finds a smile burning against his face. He takes *great* care to store the book, almost afraid of ruining it with his mortal, banal fingers. It's true that it's a craft: but beyond that, it's a gift, a present, the heart of a mother who loves her son and wants to make him feel loved as only a mother could.

Shen Yuan also receives gifts. He lets out a ridiculous, heart-pounding laugh when Airplane's gift turns out to be a keychain of Luo Binghe—the fictional, chibi Demon Emperor, complete with black and red robes, and radiant zuiyin on his forehead, maniacal grin, and all of that—which Luo Binghe himself stares at with a *completely wasted expression.* There are gifts of incredibly expensive new clothes that Shen Yuan would never have the chance to wear and

would hide in the back of his closet from his parents, a stylized assistance wristband that looks exactly like the kind of cool accessory from an eighth-grade-syndrome character that Meimei had made (and designed by herself, actually); Ming-ge gave him a fucking expensive Hatsune Miku figure flown in from Japan, and Yue Qi even gave him the complete special edition of one of his favorite serialized manga.

There aren't any gifts from Jiu-ge, but he doesn't really care that much. The truth is, after their argument and what Shen Yuan said, Shen Yuan would feel like shit if Jiu-ge gave him a gift right now. Or for the rest of the year.

He has, surprisingly, a gift from Luo Binghe.

“What kind of flower is that?” his mother asks as Shen Yuan carefully unwraps the glass flower press. A gasp catches in Shen Yuan’s throat. From the way Airplane stares at the white flower, his eyes wide open, Shen Yuan guesses that of all the things the hack author has seen so far, like his characters turned into real people, the fact that it was *also* possible to bring plants from that world into this one wasn’t doing his heart any favors.

“It’s just a decoration,” Luo Binghe hums, slightly evasive. Shen Yuan can do nothing but run his fingers over the crystal. He can see patterns carved between the two crystals, and even though the flower is pressed between them, it’s clear that somehow, as long as it’s there, it won’t wither. It has been plucked, not from the stem, just pulled up with the roots. The petals are white, tender, and even though it must have been plucked and stored for who knows how long, it looks fresh, as if it had just come out of the ground. “I thought Yuan-ge would like it.”

Shen Yuan holds his breath for a moment. Even though he's sure his mind *might* fail him—after all, there were hundreds, if not thousands, of plants in PIDW, full of weird and ridiculous names and even weirder and ridiculous side effects—the way the edges of the petals curl slightly, the center flecked with a tender shade of purple, the stem a much lighter green as it approaches the bud of petals…

“It is,” Shen Yuan said, looking reverently at the Purifying Snow Lotus, which had a reputation for curing all ills, poison, disease, and curse alike. Even if its use had never been demonstrated in PIDW, Luo Binghe’s warm expression was something to appreciate in itself. A more formal apology than a bow. A gift. An opportunity, if Shen Yuan knew how to use it. “Thank you, Binghe.”

Luo Binghe smiles from side to side. This time, his smile reaches his eyes.

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It's *too* late by the time they get home. Chengle doesn't get to read him the story, because he's fast asleep in Luo Binghe's arms from the moment they get out of the car, still asleep when Shen Yuan undresses him, and snoring a little when Shen Yuan finishes putting his pajamas on. Shen Yuan figures one night of going to bed without brushing his teeth won't be so bad when his sweet boy is so exhausted. Too much stimulation, too many people, too much food!

Luo Chengle has obtained two more boxes of Legos. More stuffed tigers for his collection, a warm blanket that turns into a cape with a simple button, more storybooks, an extremely expensive lilac Polaroid… and more, *more* stuff. Luo Binghe is the one who sets all the packages aside in the living room and who seems willing to carry Shen Yuan on his shoulder to drag him off the sofa if necessary.

“I'm moving, I'm moving, just a minute,” he complains, taking a breath. It's nice to breathe the warm air of the apartment after the frigid air outside. “I know it's late, sorry, I don't want to interrupt your beauty sleep, just a minute.”

Luo Binghe snorts. He actually seems far more amused than annoyed. He retreats to the bathroom, and only because of the quietness of Shen Yuan's apartment can he hear the shower turning on. Okay, great, he'll have at least fifteen minutes to just rest before he goes to change to a pajama and-

“Is this what Yuan-ge considers just a minute?” Luo Binghe hums. Shen Yuan flinches, noticing that he’s suddenly no longer on the sofa, and that Luo Binghe is *carrying him.* At least not slung over his shoulder like a sack as he’d initially thought, but Shen Yuan still squirms, trying to finish waking up. Shit! “Yuan-ge, falling asleep in the place that he *so kindly* gave up for this Lord, resting peacefully as a gift to him…”

“Gift!” Shen Yuan says, and squirms again. He hadn’t expected to fall asleep, that’s true; he’d been planning to rest for a moment, put on his pajamas, and then fetch the small package he’d prepared for Luo Binghe. It wasn’t that he hadn’t wanted to carry it, just… well. He thought it would be appropriate to leave it within the walls of his own home. “Luo Binghe, put me down *right now*, or you won’t get your gift.”

Luo Binghe is silent for a long moment before putting him down. He helps him stand, and Shen Yuan notes that, despite being stiff and tired, the pain is actually manageable enough that he can stealthily go to his closet, searching through the folded clothes in his drawer to pull out the small box. He leaves Chengle behind in the room with only one last glance to make sure he's still sleeping before pushing Luo Binghe back down the hall to the sofa where he sits down again.

“I know this is probably ridiculous,” Shen Yuan says, grimacing. It’s a box clumsily wrapped by his own hands, and Luo Binghe repeats his careful unwrapping. “But, well. Actually… I always wanted you to have it back. It wasn’t fair at the time, and, look, *I know* it’s not the same, but…”

Luo Binghe finally opens the box. It's not elegant at all. It's on a bed of cheap velvet that probably isn't even velvet. Shen Yuan had bought it at a ridiculous online event celebrating Airplane reaching a ridiculous sales record on the publishing platform, creating only five identical unique collectibles.

Shen Yuan had been unlucky enough to get only one.

Luo Binghe stares at the fake jade Guanyin, never more certain that it is *ridiculously* fake jade – Shen Yuan isn't even sure if it's plastic or acrylic, and too shiny to even be imitation jade – with the expression of a man who has been stabbed straight through the heart.

“I know it’s not the same,” Shen Yuan repeats. Luo Binghe still doesn’t react, but Shen Yuan’s ears are burning enough that he feels he must continue to apologize. “But, even if it isn’t. I thought… well, I don’t know, it’s ridiculous. I hope it doesn’t offend you. In fact, if it does, you can tell me and give it to me and-…”

“No,” Luo Binghe says. His hand is a delicate thing, resting it on the small fake jade in his trembling palm. It’s strange to see the green piece lying on his white palm, such a small and delicate thing, making his pulse tremble so much. “It’s… It’s identical. Yuan-ge got it, he, how did he…?”

“Ah,” Shen Yuan makes a vague sound. They haven’t spoken in depth, and other than saying that Luo Binghe comes from an epic type of story, it’s not like Shen Yuan has elaborated on… well, everything. “Well, I’ve had it for a while. Uh. I thought it might be a nice gift for you? I mean, *you should* have it. The original one.” Luo Binghe’s fingers close around the small piece. There’s a gentle delicacy to his movements, something completely devastating when his face seems to be in a storm. “It’s not fair that you don’t have it. I know it’s not the *same*, but, well… Even if it’s not the same, I don’t feel it’s fair that Chengle has his mother’s things and you don’t. You both… are very similar, you know? And I don’t…”

Shen Yuan is cut off when he sees the small bright against Luo Binghe's eyelashes.

“Oh fuck,” he says quickly. “I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean to, sorry…”

“Yuan-ge doesn’t have to apologize,” Luo Binghe says. His eyes are intense stars, long eyelashes crystal clear with tears. He looks like he’s been swept away, so much raw emotion exposed on his face that Shen Yuan feels himself tremble. “It’s the greatest gift. Yuan-ge is… is truly the greatest.”

“Oh,” Shen Yuan exhales, trying to get rid of the lump in his throat. “Binghe, I just thought… well, it’s ridiculous. I thought it would make you happy to have something to connect with your mother. I don’t know, I just wanted to make you happy, okay?”

“You do,” Luo Binghe says, his voice low. Barely a couple of tears fall, more from the flow of gravity itself; his eyes shine as if catching every light in the room, crystal-clear tears on his eyelashes, in the corners of his eyes. “Oh, Yuan-ge. You do.”

“Good,” Shen Yuan exhales again in pure relief. He licks his lips, swallowing, taking a deep breath. “I know we haven’t had the best of starts, huh,” and grimaces. Luo Binghe nods, another tear slipping as he shakes his head, and Shen Yuan feels his hands *burn* as he clutches the sofa, willing to rush over and wipe them away and stopping himself. He’s under the damn Pavlovian effect of Chengle! Too used to caring for the sweet, whining child in his arms! “But… I don’t hate you. You made some… questionable choices, yeah. But you’re certainly making an effort now, huh? Then again. Maybe you can use it as a symbolic amulet, not a replacement. I mean, *I know* it’s not the same, I’m not looking to replace it,” and Shen Yuan grimaces, too lost in his words to be clear. He takes another breath, trying to gather his thoughts before saying: “You deserve more than who you’ve forced yourself to be in order to survive.”

Luo Binghe's shoulders buckle. Suddenly, it's as if a mountain has collapsed. Shen Yuan can barely react as he finds himself sprawled against the sofa, a massive demon lord hugging him, its head pressed against his chest, as if trying to hide there. He's not trembling or crying, and in fact, he's not saying anything. Shen Yuan is certain that the position probably *isn't* the best for his waist, so he tugs on Luo Binghe's shoulders slightly, trying to shift him so he can reaccommodate better.

Luo Binghe allows it. He gives in to his grasp, not letting go for a moment. He hides his face, but Shen Yuan can't help but notice how he clings to him with open hands, a subtle trembling in his arms, as if he's physically restraining himself from squeezing so hard that Shen Yuan might feel pain.

After arranging them into a slightly more comfortable position for himself, Shen Yuan sighs and drops his hands to Luo Binghe's hair. It's still damp from the shower, and when he runs his fingers through the dark strands, he notices how much more cared for it is, the way his curls take on a subtle shape, free of knots and tangles. Luo Binghe even undone the tangled braid in the corner, and Shen Yuan runs his fingers through his hair, scratching his nails along his scalp, allowing Luo Binghe to tremble subtly in his embrace, letting him simply sob silently.

It's too much, Shen Yuan supposes. It must be too much for him. Even great Demon Emperors deserve to be cared after from time to time.

Luo Binghe is a weight that slowly becomes less uncomfortable. It's almost as if he melts in his embrace, pushing his head away so Shen Yuan can continue brushing his hair with his fingers, becoming a sticky, larger form for Shen Yuan's experienced, pampering, nurturing hands. It's almost funny, Shen Yuan thinks; when he first met Chengle, the stubborn, whiny, shy, and hostile boy, he didn't believe he could be so much like Luo Binghe. When he saw the boy grow into his best self, possessive but clingy, spoiled but well-behaved, he couldn't look into that radiant, adorable glow and think there was something similar in his little son to the father with whom he shared blood. Between his little sun Chengle and the midnight that was Luo Binghe, he was unable to find a similarity.

However, it is only now that Luo Binghe has dropped the thorny walls and defenses and has begun to mold into a sentient, *human form* that Shen Yuan can't help but notice the striking resemblance between them. They are not identical, but the two Heavenly Demons' hearts seem to beat in the same gentle synchronicity, both yearning for more love and more affection, longing for the softness of an embrace, the tender caring and love that the cruel world around them sought to snatch away from them.

Shen Yuan continues brushing Luo Binghe's hair with his fingers, letting the great demon lord hide his tears against his clothes, and allows himself to think, with just a sliver of hope, that from now on his days can only get better.

Chapter End Notes

LBH, listening from across the house to the Shen brothers' argument, where their Yuan-ge says he's just waiting for his death and right after receives a fake jade guanyin: ...oh no, it's happening again

The Shen-bros can't even be in a room alone without arguing ;P WHAT A GREAT SURPRISE, TRULY, TOTALLY UNEXPECTED, it's not like it's happened EVERY TIME I WRITE THEM IN A SCENE WITHOUT WITNESSES TO STOP THEM
SY is SO depressed it was PAINFUL. The guy was just resigned to the fact that his death would be the only thing he had to look forward to and would still have the nerve to say 'yeah, well, I'm just staying away so it doesn't hurt them when it happens' Boy. I felt like punching him *sip of tea* Good thing we're sending him to therapy once and for all

Ah, I hope those questions about whether Shen Jiu is *the* Shen Jiu from PIDW or just a counterpart have been answered ;P subtly. Subtly enough, I mean, you know me, I leave little hints of small things that I'll address when (and if) I remember in the future, ehehehe

Bingge is having complicated feelings. Everyone here is. At least he's trying his best to be a good father and a good wife..... *checks chapters* Well, that's the mandatory 10 chapters over. I'll proceed with Bingge having small successes either by seducing or just adding more drama and tension between the bingyuan until they explode. Whatever is the most fun to write :D
Btw this isn't really a immediate spoiler, but it only dawned on me at the end of this chapter that Chengle isn't going to be happy when he wakes up early in the morning to an empty bed.....

AGAIN, THANK YOU SO MUCH!!! WOW, A LOT OF PEOPLE HAVE BEEN ADDING UP TO THIS JOURNEY THESE DAYS. WELCOME. ON YOUR RIGHT, BINGYUAN HAVING FEELINGS, ON YOUR LEFT, CHENGLE HAVING FEELINGS, AND IF YOU ASK FOR A FLIGHT ATTENDANT, I CAN'T PROMISE THAT A SHEN BROTHER WON'T ACCIDENTALLY SPILL TEA ON YOU. HUGS AND KISSES TO EVERYONE!!!
THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING. I HOPE YOU LIKED THE CHAPTER A LOT!!!! You know you know, kudo-comments-interactions, YOU MAKE ME SO HAPPY, THANK YOU!!!!!
SEE YOU SOON *HUGS*

Chapter 21: First relapse, first session

Chapter Notes

> WOOOW Guys, did I tell you how much I love you? And how much I appreciate you joining me in this? THANK YOU!!
>
> I didn't cry writing this chapter, but I cried editing it, that's your author warning, in addition to—
> Chapter warnings: abandonment issues, more internalized ableism, I know theremust be a term for "person who has internalized their depression and doesn't accept that they need help" but I don't know what it is so that (YES, we finally took SY to therapy)
>
> Enjoy the chapter!! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan wakes up, aching to the bone. For a long, dazed moment, it takes him a while to realize exactly *why.* Then he feels as if a mountain is crushing him, his breathing labored, his neck stiff, his limbs tense in the most awkward of positions, and a huge, heavy thing using him as a pillow.

A huge, heavy thing that turns out to be a deeply asleep Luo Binghe.

Shen Yuan throws his head back, staring up at the ceiling, barely lit by the icy lights of a sunrise filtering through the fogged-up windows. The lights spread out, cold, blue, and pale, and it takes Shen Yuan a while to feel the chill on his toes or the tip of his nose because apparently, as he's coming to understand, the damned Heavenly Demons are like some kind of heater, radiating a high level of body heat when they sleep.

“Binghe,” he whispers, trying to wake him. He stirs as best he can, gently patting his face. “*Binghe.*”

It takes longer than it should to wake Luo Binghe. When he wakes, blinking lazily, he has pillow lines—creased lines from the pattern on Shen Yuan’s sweater—squashed against his face, and he’s practically so adorable that Shen Yuan has to stop himself from laughing in his face.

“Yuan-ge?” he stammers. His eyes are swollen and red, and his hair is an absolute mess. He blinks again, slowly waking up, and suddenly it’s as if he realizes he’s been using Shen Yuan as a pillow, because his face is paling at an alarming rate. “Yuan-ge!”

“Shhh,” Shen Yuan hisses at him, causing him to lower his voice. “Chengle is still sleeping. Come on, help me.”

It's with some difficulty that Luo Binghe helps him up. Everything hurts, but not in an unpleasant way; at least, not unbearable.

“Could you run me a hot shower?” he continues in a low voice. Luo Binghe nods. “Then I think a couple of those ointments and I’ll go back to sleep. God, I invaded your bed. I’m sorry.”

Luo Binghe raises an eyebrow. He doesn't have an expression that seems to intend to make Shen Yuan feel guilty.

“This Lord has rested better than ever,” he says, but doesn’t press the issue when Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Luo Binghe is helpful: he runs the hot shower and even moves the plastic support chair into the tub, and when Shen Yuan nearly stumbles out of the shower but is in one piece and his stiff muscles are in much better condition, Luo Binghe is already helping him to the sofa, rubbing in the ointments until the pain goes from tolerable to a subtle shadow, no harsher than the aftermath of a bad cramp.

It's early morning when Shen Yuan finally gets into bed, wearing his pajamas and yawning. Chengle is curled up in the corner, cuddling his enormous stuffed Dawang Tiger. Shen Yuan covers his back more closely, kisses the side of his head, and only then, as the boy seems to snuggle closer to his stuffed animal, does he notice small tear marks on his cheeks.

“Oh, baby…” he whispers. He hugs Chengle, holding him gently in his arms as he snuggles under the blankets. Shen Yuan supposes it makes sense; even with all the nice things, his mother’s gift must have been something that stirred a lot of memories and emotions in his sweet little boy.

He holds him gently, humming a nonsense tune under his breath until Shen Yuan falls asleep too.

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Luo Chengle is a sulky little thing all morning. He skips half his breakfast, doesn't even want to play with his new toys, and when Shen Yuan wants to hug him, he slaps him away at least three times. He doesn't even look in Luo Binghe's direction, who, each time, stares at Shen Yuan with question marks practically etched on his forehead.

Shen Yuan tries to be as understanding as he can. Though it's clear there's a massive setback in his behavior, *he supposes* it makes sense: Chengle has been bombarded by emotions bigger than himself. He just needs to find a way to address it… which isn't proving difficult at all, with the boy sulking, turning his back on him, not even speaking to him, and staring at him like a evil doll whenever Shen Yuan gets too close.

By lunchtime, Shen Yuan finds the stuffed kangaroo in the trash can when he goes to throw away the potato peels Luo Binghe had just peeled for try a new recipe. He sighs, taking it out. He throws the stuffed kangaroo into the washing machine after seeing that it's at least still intact, and heads to where Chengle has taken refuge in the room.

“Chengle, darling,” he murmurs at the door. The boy has his back turned, cuddling a tiger and quietly playing with some Legos. He doesn’t seem to be doing much more than putting things together and taking them apart. In fact, he seems to have taken apart all the little houses he’d made, stacking the blocks in uneven shapes as if he doesn’t know what to do now that he’s taken them apart. “Can we talk?”

“No,” the boy mumbles. His little hands grip the strange structure he’s making tightly, causing it to break into two pieces. “Leave me alone.”

“Chengle…”

“I said no!” the boy raises his voice. He does so with a force that physically pains Shen Yuan. “No, no, *no*! I don’t want to talk to you, I don’t want to play with you, I don’t want you! Leave me alone!”

Shen Yuan lets out a deep sigh. He goes into the room as well, but doesn't sit next to Chengle, or even come close. He simply picks up a random book from the counter, flops down on the bed, and opens it.

“Leave!” Chengle insists *again*. “I said leave me alone!”

“I won’t leave,” Shen Yuan says, giving the boy what he hopes is a reassuring smile. It doesn’t work at all, as Chengle’s brow furrows. “I won’t force you to talk to me if you don’t want to. But I’ll stay here keeping you company until you want to.”

Chengle gives him the worst look Shen Yuan has received in *weeks.* Then he snorts and crawls on the floor until his back is to Shen Yuan.

Shen Yuan flips the pages every few moments, pretending to read. He listens intently for the sounds of the Legos clicking together, but he doesn't hear a sound from Chengle; usually, the boy mumbles when he plays, either talking in the voices of his stuffed animals, humming, making up stories, or just discussing his ideas aloud while he's building. Right now, silent and tiny, Shen Yuan finds it hard to tear his eyes away from him, unable to understand how he can help how clearly sad and angry he is.

He doesn't plan on leaving, at least. When Chengle wants to talk to him, he'll be there. Even if it means the child cries and screams a little. Even if it hurts right in his heart.

Chengle continues stacking blocks while Shen Yuan pretends to read. They are wrapped in a tense, harsh silence for longer than Shen Yuan would like. He's trying to decipher what could have put him in this strange mood, more aggressive than emotionally sad, trying to understand if it's just a matter of Heavenly Demons processing sadness with anger, or if it's just his little boy unable to grasp healthy ways of managing sadness despite everything...

Luo Chengle stands up. Shen Yuan sees him out of the corner of his eye, and tries not to look in his direction as the boy sets up the Lego tower— *that's not a tower.*

The boy waves the strange Lego sword he's made in the air once, twice, three times. When clearly nothing happens, he lets out a strangled scream and throws it across the room, tears

streaming down his face. The Lego sword thuds, shattering with Legos bouncing in all directions. Shen Yuan stands up so fast he feels dizzy.

“Chengle,” he calls, and the boy looks at him with big, burning eyes. “Honey. What…?”

“Don’t talk to me!” the boy howls. His voice cracks at the exact moment tears begin to fall heavily from his face. Shen Yuan is almost like a puppet, a doll pulled by strings more powerful than his own actions, dropping to his knees carefully to hold the trembling, sobbing boy, who writhes in his arms like the first day. “I don’t want you! Leave me alone! I hate you!”

“Chengle!” Shen Yuan raises his voice only slightly, more in fright than to scold him. The boy continues to writhe, his small hands thrashing out in a stinging motion, his cries so brutal they tear at him. “Love, darling. Please talk to me. What’s wrong?”

“Liar!” the boy shrieks, and the swipe he throws now sends him sprawling. It stings, but Chengle, between tears and his horrible wailing, doesn’t even seem to be aware of himself. “Liar! Liar, liar! I hate you!”

Shen Yuan locks his jaw to keep from complaining of pain as he tries to sit up. He barely manages to shift his position on the floor before the stinging pain in his leg reaches his hip and he literally can't even stand up afterward.

"Baby…"

“*NO!”* and Chengle screams so loudly, so hard, that Shen Yuan can *feel* his skin prickle. His large, watery eyes glow red, and his face has never looked paler, more wretched. “You *lied* to me! You said you weren’t going to marry Father Emperor! *Liar*!”

It takes Shen Yuan a full moment to process Chengle's words, and then almost five full seconds of stupefied, horrified silence to understand *why* the boy is saying this. It hits him like a sledgehammer to the stomach.

Luo Chengle hadn't been asleep. Not all night, at least.

“Honey, that’s not…”

“Don’t *lie* to me!” Luo Chengle’s wounded little eyes are filled with tears, his hands are balled into trembling fists, and his eyes are burning. “I *saw you*! You were sleeping together! You are married!”

Shen Yuan has to take a deep breath. His hands are shaking, and he's not sure if it's from the huge surge of stress he's experiencing, disbelief, shock, grief, not knowing how to hold his son, or a combination of all of the above.

“You’re right,” he says softly, and Chengle looks at him with such pain on his little face that Shen Yuan feels he could cry too. “You saw your father and me sleeping in the same place. But that doesn’t make us married.”

“Yes, it does!” the boy shouts. He seems fully prepared to resort to violence if necessary to make Shen Yuan go away, and Shen Yuan is pretty sure he’ll end up with bruises after that. “I saw!”

“Honey, I know,” Shen Yuan struggles to breathe and not panic. Even as his head constantly repeats a *shit, shit, shit*, he has to stay calm. He has to be the adult, because Luo Chengle needs Shen Yuan to be the adult now more than ever. “But we’re not married. I didn’t marry your father.”

“Liar,” the boy says, between hiccups and cries. “I hate you, I hate you, liar…”

“Chengle,” Shen Yuan struggles to make his voice steady. “I know this must be confusing and stressful for you. I’m not saying you didn’t see… what you saw. But, sweetheart, it’s not… it’s not like that.”

Shen Yuan tries to be extremely careful with his words. Luo Binghe and he are two clearly straight men! It's not that it means anything. It doesn't have to mean anything. However, to a child like Chengle, how could he possibly explain something like that? And even if he does explain it, Shen Yuan isn't sure the child would *fully* understand.

It's not about his heterosexuality or his father's, not now. It's more important than all of that, because what was the point of clarifying and going off on tangents about something that isn't urgent for the child? It's not about a wedding. It's about *fear*. It's about Chengle understanding that he hasn't betrayed his trust, and that he won't be abandoned.

“I saw…” the boy sniffles. His expression is torn, terrible, and Shen Yuan tries again to hold him. He writhes less, and the crying only gets louder. “Yuan-ge promised…”

“I slept in the same place as your father last night,” he says, trying not to sound high-pitched and hysterical about it. Not that it was a phrase he could ever imagine himself saying! “That doesn’t mean I’m married to him. I promise.”

Chengle's pout is a quivering thing. The boy looks heartbreakingly broken, with those watery little eyes, a red face, and puffy eyes. He's a sweet, fragile little boy, and Shen Yuan just wants to squeeze him into the tightest hug.

“I don’t want it,” the little boy stammers, and finally, it’s as if all his fury melts away, collapsing in a cascade of wretched tears. “I don’t want it, I don’t want it. Yuan-ge can’t marry Father Emperor. If Yuan-ge marries Father Emperor, Yuan-ge will abandon me! And I love Yuan-ge very much! I don’t want my heart to hurt again! I don’t want to!”

Shen Yuan exhales slowly. He reaches out his arms a little gingerly, and though Luo Chengle resists, it's less so now that he seems more sad than angry. When Shen Yuan pulls him into a hug, the boy cries and hiccups loudly, but doesn't move away.

“I will *never* abandon you,” Shen Yuan vows, so firmly that the boy trembles in his grasp. He squeezes him with tiny, overly strong arms, and Shen Yuan is all too certain that the hug will burn into his skin. “Love, Chengle. Darling. I know you’re so scared, but I swear I will never, *ever* leave you,” he promises. He hugs Chengle tightly in his arms, his grip firm and yet

gentle at the same time. “I know these have been difficult times for you. But I promise you, *I swear*, that nothing and no one will ever replace you. You will always be my priority. Okay? Do you trust me?”

Chengle sobs louder. He only hugs himself tighter, trembling. Shen Yuan holds him there, gently rocking him in his arms between his cries and hiccups, letting the child vent all his tears.

“Yuan-ge can’t,” Chengle stammers, between wet hiccups. “Yuan-ge can’t abandon me. He can’t have Emperor Father’s babies and leave me. You can’t. You can’t, you *can’t*.”

Shen Yuan feels just a tiny bit of silly relief. Well, that's an easy promise.

“You’re my only baby,” Shen Yuan promises, rocking him gently in his arms. He lets the child climb onto his lap, snuggling closer, becoming almost tiny in his arms. “How could I ever have another, really? You’re the cutest, the sweetest, the smartest. Who needs more babies?”

“But,” Chengle sniffles, hiccuping. His gaze is disconsolate as he pulls away slightly. “Yuan-ge slept with Father Emperor! And now you are married and Yuan-ge will have his baby and he is going to abandon me again.”

Shen Yuan exhales slowly. Good. He's not going to talk about… any of that with his child. Not *yet*. Not without being mentally prepared for it! Isn't he supposed to have a gap of many years before having to give any kind of talk like this?

“Sweetie,” he murmurs, brushing a few strands of hair away from his red face. “I’m sure your silly Emperor Father has had a few weddings since you were old enough to attend. Am I wrong?” And the boy sniffs, pouting and shaking his head. “I didn’t marry your father. There was no wedding. And yes, we… fell asleep in the same place, together,” he tries to soften his voice as best he can, trying not to let the almost hysterical tone of saying that out loud slip through the net, “but that *doesn’t* mean I’m married to him. I promise.”

Chengle's eyes are sweet, tear-filled eyes. Shen Yuan's heart breaks when he looks into them, and he carefully wipes away the thick tears on his face.

“Yuan-ge promises?” Chengle finally says, his voice a whisper of softness. Shen Yuan gently kisses his forehead, warm from the strain of crying, placing tender little kisses at the corners of his eyes, and holding the boy in the tightest hug his arms can muster.

“I promise,” Shen Yuan says, trying to make the boy understand how truly he means it. “I didn’t marry your father, nor will I have his babies,” and he hugs Chengle a little tighter. “The only one of his babies I’ll always have with me is *you*. Forever, forever. You’re all mine.”

It doesn't seem like enough to wash away Chengle's sadness, but it's true that in children, sadness is so deep that it could drown an adult when they don't know how to handle it. Shen Yuan keeps holding him, rocking him in his arms, letting the child let out little hiccups of crying, curled up in his arms like the sweet, tender baby he is.

Only when Chengle is only letting out small hiccups without crying does Shen Yuan finish wiping the last tears from his face, kiss his cheeks, and say, “And anyway, honey. Your father wouldn’t want to marry me, you know?”

Luo Chengle frowns so abruptly it's almost funny.

“That’s *a lie,*” he complains, pouting. Shen Yuan has to stop himself from laughing; ah, what a sweet, cuddly boy. Shen Yuan can understand why Chengle sees him as some sort of… maternal-paternal figure? He’s aware that he emulates much of his own mother’s nurturing in caring for Chengle—sue him, it worked!—but none of that changes the fact that Shen Yuan is a man. And Luo Binghe *doesn’t* like men. “He wants.”

Shen Yuan pinches his cheek. This time the boy does try to bite him, but it's not even intentional, just a movement that seems instinctive. Shen Yuan just gently rubs his cheek between his fingers; he's not going to tell the boy he's wrong. The last thing he wants to do, right now, is throw another tantrum. If Chengle *believes,* through all his insecurities, that that could happen, well. It's not that the boy is speaking the truth, but the perception of his fears, isn't it?

“Well, let him continue wants,” Shen Yuan says, and only then does Chengle’s smile cross his mouth, a tiny bit, more mischievous than amused. Ah, really, what a child he is… “If your Father Emperor wants me to marry him, he’ll have to convince you first. Does that work for you?”

“Yes!” says Chengle, and Shen Yuan finds himself grinning with relief that slams him right into his chest. The boy’s face is still swollen from crying, but a subtle, bright, childlike emotion is returning to him. He supposes there’s nothing better for this particular boy than to be able to defy his foolish big dad. “Father Emperor will never convince me! *Never*! Yuan-ge is just *my* Yuan-ge! My Baba Yuan!”

Shen Yuan stands still with the child in his arms, looking at his burning eyes, his trembling pout, and can only pull him into a too-tight hug.

“What did you call me?” he murmurs into the boy’s hair, his heart like a hummingbird fluttering between his ribs, and so much love that his body is overflowing with it. What does the pain, the stress matter? Nothing, nothing at all, not now.

“*Yuan-ge,*” Chengle protests, just a little, and Shen Yuan realizes he may be holding him awkwardly, loosening his arms around him. “Baba Yuan,” Luo Chengle repeats softly, in that small, hesitant tone he’d used the first few times he’d called him Yuan-ge, all the way back to what felt like an eternity ago. “Is it okay if I call Yuan-ge that?”

Shen Yuan tries to formulate something other than *please.* He takes a breath and gathers his thoughts before saying, “If that’s how Chengle feels, nothing would make me happier.”

It seems like the right thing to say. His sweet boy takes refuge in his arms and stays there, curled up until Shen Yuan has to stand up when his muscles genuinely can't take it anymore; his adrenaline seems to have subsided enough that the pain hits him harder than the worry.

And yet, Chengle is a sweet little baby, almost glued to his side even when Shen Yuan has to do some stretches to loosen the tension, and even more so when they cuddle up with the book Shen Yuan was pretending to read. He doesn't protest at all later when Luo Binghe comes to call them to eat and seems to thoroughly enjoy relegating Luo Binghe to eating far away, looking at him with a snarl that makes Shen Yuan roll his eyes.

“He’s feeling a lot right now,” Shen Yuan tells Luo Binghe, almost apologetically, as he walks past him with his plates of food on the coffee table. “Maybe he’ll be better off tonight.”

“Or not,” Luo Binghe says, but he doesn’t sound bitter about it. Luo Binghe looks in Chengle’s direction, and he doesn’t seem to find an enemy or a stranger in the boy who is clearly sticking his tongue out at him behind Shen Yuan’s back, if Shen Yuan knows him well. His eyes are softer, though strangely determined. “Whatever he wants, will be fine. This Lord will… respect that.”

Shen Yuan finds himself smiling more about this than about being able to eat a pair of soft boiled wontons for the first time in what seems like an eternity.

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Of course Jiu-ge wasn't going to keep him waiting. Shen Yuan can't help but imagine that as soon as Shen Yuan verbally agreed, his dumbass brother was already calling to make the appointment, right on Christmas Eve and with zero respect for any other worker below him.

Now, the office of his new therapist is totally different from what Shen Yuan would have expected.

Accustomed to the sterile white walls typical of hospitals, sometimes just a hint of mint green, when he is greeted by a receptionist with square glasses, hair in an overly careless cut that seems to be trying to be casual and failing miserably in the attempt, and psoriasis scars on his face, Shen Yuan feels exaggeratedly approached by unknown stimuli, more typical of a strange dark bohemian coffee-bar-library than a therapist's office.

The reception area doesn't have uncomfortable plastic chairs, but rather comfortable dark leather armchairs. The walls are a deep burgundy red that manages to look strangely peaceful against the dark wood furniture, old American movies posters on the walls, and lava lamps. There are shelves full of expensive fashion magazines, shag carpeting that must be a pain to clean, and old ladies' novels with worn spines on the racks next to new issues of *Vogue China* or *ELLE*.

The lighting is low and warm, the entire enormous reception area filled with a feeling that could almost be homey, and Shen Yuan has no idea where the hell his brother got this therapist from, or if he even knows *who* he was sending him to. He doesn't look like the kind of professional Shen Jiu would approve of. He's not even sure it looks like a professional's office at all.

“Welcome, come in, have a seat,” the receptionist instructs, guiding him to any of the seats. Shen Yuan takes one of the most accessible ones so he can stand up later, leaving his cane at his side. It turns out to be the only seat right next to a huge fish tank built into the wall.

Instead of fish, it has warm lights above a terrarium in which two white snakes, longer than his entire arm, seem to be resting lazily under the lights.

Shen Yuan watches them, trying not to sound stupid as he asks, “Are they… *real* snakes?”

“Mhn. *Lampropeltis getula californiae* albino,” says the receptionist, who has already sat down at his desk a little further away. He’s typing something on his laptop, not looking up from it as he speaks, a small smile curling the corners of his mouth. “Though here we call them Snow and White.”

Shen Yuan watches the princess transformed into two snakes with a strange feeling of dark fascination. To hell with therapy. He wouldn't mind coming to observe them; they are beautiful creatures, not too big but long enough, with rhythmic, slow breathing once he can notice it. They are clearly not just weird decoration.

“They're, uh, funny names,” he says, just to say the least. A glance at the receptionist's desk, who now looks up at the snakes with something close to affection, makes it clear he probably has some connection with them. How… funny. “You named them?”

“Oh, no, not at all,” the receptionist shakes his head. A lock of overly long hair falls over the side of his face. “I wanted to name them Pain and Panic, but the doctor mentioned it might not be entirely patient-friendly. Too sad.”

“Wow,” Shen Yuan raises his eyebrows. He hasn’t even met the doctor, but *he hopes* he doesn’t dislike him. It would be unpleasant to waste the opportunity to see snakes outside of a snake farm. “And the doctor is…?”

“He’s a good professional, the best I know,” says the receptionist, going back to typing on his laptop. He seems to have found what he’s looking for, because a small expression of triumph crosses his face; Shen Yuan can’t help but notice that he probably looks younger than him, like a young intern on his first job. “Here. Appointment for 2:00 p.m. on the 26th, made by Shen Jiu…” the receptionist murmurs, almost to himself, and then types again. “Good, good. So, Shen Yuan?” He looks up from his laptop only to see Shen Yuan nod. When he nods, the receptionist returns his gaze to his laptop. “Well, your brother has already covered the first session, so you shouldn’t worry about that. However, it would be helpful if you could confirm your details, assign an emergency contact, and provide me with a payment method…”

“Sure,” Shen Yuan shrugs. The receptionist looks up from his laptop only to search one of the drawers for a large folder, which he drops with a loud clatter onto the desk. Shen Yuan has enough experience with Chengle accidentally knocking things over not to be startled by the noise.

The receptionist opens the large folder and sorts through a few items before taking out a few papers. He hands them to Shen Yuan along with a pen and clipboard. Shen Yuan finds a pile of half-completed information, probably containing the basic information Jiu-ge had needed to provide for the appointment: full name, age, address, etc.

“I’ve already notified the doctor that you’ve arrived, and he’ll be with you soon,” the receptionist says, snapping him out of his quick perusal. His smile is gentle. Shen Yuan notices more of the marks on his skin, hidden on his neck and the back of his hand. They look almost amusingly as if the snakes aren’t the only ones with those cute scales in the room. “Would you like some water, tea, coffee?”

“Still water, please. Thank you,” Shen Yuan says. His mouth feels strangely dry, and he wants to assume it’s more due to nerves than anything else. He’s obviously nervous. His last visit to a therapist was at age thirteen, and *it wasn’t* a pleasant experience at all.

Sighing, Shen Yuan fills out the forms and paperwork with his own phone number, email address, and adds Airplane as an emergency contact, though he has no idea why *they would need* an emergency contact for him. It's not like Shen Yuan is like those deeply depressed patients who are at risk of suicide or something.

He completes all the details on the form. Add a rough list of the medications he's been taking (why does it matter, anyways? The doctor is a therapist, he hasn’t the authority to prescribe any medication!), his diagnoses, and other details that are oddly specific for a general form.

His immediate family background is… harder to explain on paper. It's easy for him to put "single" in the marital status box, but... well. How do he can explain that he has a son, but his son also has another father, and that father now lives part-time at his house? But that father is married to... wives. *Plural* in wives. Just mentioning half of that would be ridiculously *weird!* Well, these aren't things Shen Yuan can generally air, so he just adds that he has a son and shares custody with his other parent (neutrality, thank goodness!).

He skims over the informed consent form, where he signs and carelessly adds his information. The typical legal document that protects therapists from being able to spill the beans to emergency contacts when they see some kind of potential danger. Yes, Shen Yuan *has* experience with that.

The receptionist returns with a glass of water. Or, well, *it could* be a glass, except it's a strange, elegant crystal goblet, overly crafted by probably a artisan who must have been paid *a lot* to make something so extravagantly tasteful. He accepts it with a smile that he tries to make easy as he sips, filling in all the spaces.

From the moment he hands the receptionist the paperwork so he can add it to his laptop until the office door opens, Shen Yuan remains silent, calm, watching the snakes, holding his ugly, empty glass, for almost five minutes. At the exact moment it's one minute past two (Shen Yuan *wasn't going* to be late), the office door opens.

“Well, well,” the doctor’s voice, especially *his tone*, makes Shen Yuan look at him with an immediate raised eyebrow. “Not even a little conversation? Nephew, how sad. You’re supposed to keep my patients entertained.”

The doctor is *tall.* It's the first thing Shen Yuan notices. The second is that he's a man in his early fifties, with wavy hair that's jet-black except for streaks of gray sprouting from the roots and hangs almost to his shoulders. The doctor is dressed in black from head to toe; *even his nails are pure black*, except for a... pearl necklace? and red earrings with dangling stones. He

has a lazy, almost bored expression, and when he looks at Shen Yuan, the smile that curves his mouth reveals the edge of a dimple.

Shen Yuan feels goosebumps.

“Not everyone is into conversation, doctor,” says the receptionist—the doctor’s nephew? Shen Yuan isn’t entirely sure he *wants to* know, but at the same time, he’s actually dying to ask.

“You're such a good conversationalist, but you're wasting your very great potential,” the doctor said, and he let out an almost tragic sigh. Then he approached Shen Yuan, giving him an old-fashioned, respectful nod. “First time here, huh? Come, come. Let's make you comfortable for our little interview.”

Shen Yuan places his glass on a small table to the side, ignoring the magazines. He stands up with the help of his cane, truly grateful for his choice of seat. The doctor is already gathering the papers Shen Yuan gave to the receptionist, and only after he's given a quick glance does he raise his eyebrows and guide him into the office.

If the reception desk shattered his expectations of a clinical space, the therapist’s office is even *worse*. There's no desk with uncomfortable plastic chairs, just a low, ugly table piled high with more magazines, a notebook bound with a pile of magazine paper in something that almost looks homemade, and even a ridiculous pen with a red pompom next to it. The lights are still low and warm, and posters with unframed photographs are spread out in strange patterns on the walls.

Unfortunately there are no snakes.

There's a large black leather sofa filled with many soft cushions, and to choose from, there's a typical divan on one side, a chair, and an armchair on the far side. Shen Yuan waits for the doctor to take a seat (or rather: he slumps awkwardly) on the sofa before taking his own seat in the armchair.

“Interesting,” he hums, smiling. He’s already closed the door behind them, and Shen Yuan guesses it’s a soundproof space. “Well, let me introduce myself. I’m Dr. Jun. Let me confirm a few things…” Dr. Jun crosses his legs on the couch, snooping through the papers. When everything seems to be in order, he finally pushes him aside. Shen Yuan *literally has to* stop himself from looking at his watch and wondering how much longer he can waste him without saying anything to confirm to Jiu-ge that he did go, that the doctor was crazy, and that he’s not coming back. “Good,” Dr. Jun says, smiling broadly. “Shen Yuan, then. Do you have any previous experience in therapy?”

“One,” Shen Yuan answers, so quickly he feels choked. He clears his throat. “When I was a teenager.”

“I assume it was unpleasant,” Dr. Jun hums, his expression clearly amused. Shen Yuan isn’t sure he has the aim to throw his cane at him, but he hasn’t relaxed enough on the couch that he can’t get up and leave. “I won’t ask you about it. Not yet, well, not ever if you don’t want to talk about it,” and Dr. Jun shrugs. “I just need to know.”

Shen Yuan sighs. He fiddles with the edge of his cane's grip, unsure of how to respond. Finally, he shrugs and says, "Yes, it was unpleasant. She told my parents everything I said, and it caused a huge scandal at home. I never went back."

"*Understandable,*" says Dr. Jun, clearly feeling strongly about this as he goes back to sorting through his papers. "Well, I promise I won't tell your parents. Especially since you didn't leave your parents' number," and Shen Yuan has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. Well, if Dr. Jun was losing money as a therapist, he might as well try improv comedy. "However, I am legally obliged to tell you that *I will* need to speak to your emergency contact if I notice you may be a danger to yourself or others."

"Oh, I know, I read the form," Shen Yuan sighs. How long has it been? Five minutes? There are 40 left. *He can* deal with another 40. *He needs* to deal with another 40 so he doesn't have to go back.

"I'm glad we're in agreement!" He tapped his hand on the paper. "Okay, then. Let me tell you how I work."

"Please don't mention Freud," Shen Yuan says, so quickly and spontaneously that the doctor bursts out laughing.

"Oh, no. We hate Freud in this house," Dr. Jun is smiling. There's something strange about him, Shen Yuan thinks; it feels like seeing someone familiar, but Shen Yuan thinks it's because he's the typical handsome-older face, similar to the same five actors who aged gracefully who appear in every drama because they're still visual enough for it. "I don't do psychoanalysis or any of that stuff. In fact, psychoanalysts and I are natural mortal enemies. I'm a therapist specializing in CBT. Have you heard of it?"

"In name only," Shen Yuan shrugs. Cognitive behavioral therapy was what his brother had been insisting on sending him to for... well, years. He hasn't done any research, anyway! Not that any of it has ever been relevant to him.

"As long as you've heard of it," Dr. Jun puts his papers aside again, face down. He takes the notebook and opens it to a random page, apparently. "Good. Let me explain a little bit about how this works. CBT is based on three things: your thoughts, your emotions, and your behaviors. Everything we'll do here will revolve around identifying them, questioning them, and practicing new ways of responding healthily to them." Dr. Jun scribbles occasionally in his notebook. The red pompom on his pen bounces with every movement and makes Shen Yuan feel like a damn cat following him around, but it's so ridiculous and in bad taste that he can't stop doing it. "If you're okay with it, we'll continue."

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath. Couldn't this be a normal psychologist asking him how he felt, analyzing his dreams, and trying to figure out his non-existent childhood traumas?

"Okay," he says, drumming his fingers on the edge of his cane.

"I like that," and Dr. Jun seems to gloat a little. "Now, I'm going to be completely transparent with you. I'm going to be direct, *sometimes* uncomfortable, and I'm not going to sugarcoat anything for you. My job is, if I find any kind of thought spiral, self-destructive behavior, or

emotion that you could address differently, *to* snap you out of it. And it's not going to be easy or pretty for you." He jots it down with his pen. Shen Yuan feels ridiculously judged by a stupid red pompom. "But it will be helpful, in the long run, because it will be for your well-being. Are you okay with that?"

"I have no choice, do I?" Shen Yuan grimaces. Dr. Jun smiles back.

"Well, if you want to come to my office, I don't think so," he hums. He scribbles something small in his notebook and boasts about having internet access and access to tutorials on how to twirl a pen between his fingers, because he does it perfectly. "I'll also give you homework outside of the session. Yeah, yeah, welcome back to school. You'll have homework. It won't be so much or anything. *But* it's going to force you to look inside yourself and do things you probably don't want to do. Acceptable to you?"

"I guess so," Shen Yuan grimaces. Good. *Good.* Is it like ten minutes? No, obviously not, probably less, but it's time he's buying himself by not saying anything. He just needs to stretch it out a little longer and…

"Perfect," Dr. Jun scribbles again in his notebook. "So, for now, I just want to get to know you. You don't have to talk to me about those things you obviously *don't* want to talk to me about," and Shen Yuan closes his mouth before he can begin to say whatever he was about to say. "Let's start with something basic, okay? Just getting to know you. For now, you know, I need to know *who* I'm going to be working with before I understand *what* we're going to be working with. How about instead of being on the verge of jumping off that couch, you relax a little and tell me a little about your general daily routine? And *maybe later* we can talk about why your brother made you come here. I'll even let you talk ill about him, if you want."

Shen Yuan opens his mouth again, only to close it. He clears his throat. Okay, great. To hell with evading any longer. He promised Jiu-ge he'd try, anyway, so…

"My routine isn't interesting at all," he shrugs again. He tries to shift a little further onto the armchair. It's… quite comfortable, really. However, it's not comfortable enough to make him forget about the doctor, who's willing to analyze every nook and cranny in his head as if it were a damn Operation Game. "I don't have a formal job, so I just wake up, have breakfast, play with my son… and that's really all I do. I take care of him and make sure he's happy. I used to read a lot," he grimaces slightly. No, he's *not* going to talk about PIDW in therapy. Not in the least. "Now I just… occasionally. I read to my son."

"Well, children are chaotic and unpredictable," the doctor said, not seeming to make a face, though the way he said it made Shen Yuan raise an eyebrow. "I wouldn't say it's not an uninteresting routine. Being the only caregiver of a child is never boring."

"Uh," Shen Yuan said, feeling his ears warm slightly. "Well, I'm not his only caregiver."

"Oh," and Doctor Jun, with a shit-eating grin that makes Shen Yuan feel the same kind of violent impulse as with Airplane, simply says, "Ah, the thing is you didn't mention anyone else in your routine…"

“Well,” Shen Yuan grimaces, “yeah, I mean, it’s recent. Everything’s recent,” and sighs. His head’s starting to hurt, and it’s probably *only* been like ten minutes. Fuck.

“How recent?” Dr. Jun has a curious expression. Shen Yuan avoids eye contact as he answers.

“About two months,” he says, and Doctor Jun makes a sound that’s rather hard to identify. “Well, I mean. My son… I took care of him for a while on my own. Now… well, I’m still taking care of him on my own,” and he grimaces. It hadn’t been *easy* to convince Chengle to let him go out on his own, let alone Luo Binghe—though that was probably because Shen Yuan had called Airplane in as a supervising nanny for Chengle and Luo Binghe, who had looked at him with wide, pitiful eyes when he’d had to say goodbye before leaving. Damn those two. If Shen Yuan had a hard time with one, when the *two* of them got their act together they were a huge problem! “…but, I mean, do I have more help? Around the house, and in the kitchen, and stuff like that.”

“Things you used to take care of?” asks Dr. Jun. Shen Yuan shakes his head.

“I hired a cleaning Ayi and a cooking Ayi. And, uh, they haven’t had a chance yet.” He grimaces again. Really, at what point had Luo Binghe switched to basically running and maintaining his entire apartment? All Shen Yuan ever did was do the laundry, only because it involved throwing it in the washer, then the dryer, and finally folding it and throwing it in the closet. And Luo Binghe had simply decided to take care of all the meals, the cleaning, and… well.

At least he was doing *something*. Shen Yuan assumes it's positive.

“So, your routine *before* your child was…?”

Shen Yuan grimaces. Dr. Jun holds the pen in his hands, and when Shen Yuan begins to speak and he begins to write so quickly he almost seems like an expert calligrapher, the truth is that, deep down, *Shen Yuan was expecting it.* He's no stranger to how his life, or what his life used to be, might look or be interpreted, just...

Well. Just because he was aware that everyone thought he was very depressed doesn't mean he agreed that he was. Why would he even be depressed, anyway? He has everything, he doesn't have to work at anything! Aren't people with depression supposed to have, like, *real problems?*

Shen Yuan allows Dr. Jun to take notes, make melodramatic eyebrow gestures, ask questions, and relaxes further and further against the armchair, talking until his mouth goes dry to get the time over with.

It's not like he's coming back anyway, is he? He might as well seize the opportunity and complain while he's there.

Chapter End Notes

SY: No darling, your father doesn't want to marry me
Chengle, who clearly knows his father well enough: ... yes, he wants :((((

SY: I am totally against this therapy
SY: I only stay for the visual stimuli
SY: YES, THE SNAKES, WHY ARE YOU LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT??

KDNSLDMSI from the moment I decided SY would go to therapy, I decided exactly who his therapist would be :P Look, I personally have nothing against psychoanalysis, it has been very helpful to me, BUT CBT has been more helpful to me, so, I have my favorites
I'm a therapist and I know how to conduct a therapy session even if it's narrative and fake? No, definitely no, but I've been going to therapy for a few years now and I THINK I can keep it vague and not so wrong at the same time. Anyway, my very neccesary disclaimer here: none of the techniques or therapeutic elements I explain in these chapters will be validated by a real therapist. I don't recommend trying them or taking them personally. I'll cover some therapy sessions relevant to SY in future chapters, but if any of these things resonate with you, I recommend seeking professional help to talk it through! :D

HAVING BABY CHENGLE THROWS INTO A TANTRUM WAS LIKE *squeezes my heart* the poor baby scared of being replaced again, unable to fully understand how things are supposed to work. He loves his Baba Yuan so much :'3
I saw you, Shen Yuan, repeating and pulling all the strings of that little conversation to never say 'I'll never marry your father.' I KNOW your closeted heart has hopes that even you don't know it harbors, but it's okay, darling, okay, you're in therapy now. Little by little, you will figure that out
Also, SJ sending SY to a therapist who's as queer as it's possible to get in China. Yuanyuan sorry but your brother caught you, please come out of that closet now, you're just humiliating yourself

I like imagining Airplane seeing how his enormous demon emperor protagonist is now wearing a jade guanyin necklace over his turtleneck sweater, his hair curly and better maintained than usual, trying to play and share with his son who is clearly still sulking at him, and trying to process what that means for his own mental health
Also at some point that same afternoon, Bingge got tired of being supervised by a pathetic human and brought in Mobei Jun so Airplane could give his attempts at being a father some space while he drools all over General Mobei's tits. It worked

MHAW, I HOPE YOU REALLY LIKED THE CHAPTER AND ENJOYED IT!!!!! THANKS SO MUCH FOR READING!!!!! It was so emotional writing the scene with Chengle that I can't describe the whiplash of going to the therapy session a scene later XD Dude, that was fun. OH WELL, THANK YOU AS ALWAYS FOR ACCOMPANYING ME THROUGH THIS CRAZY JOURNEY!!! FLYING OUT WITH YOU, THANKS TO YOU FOR SO MUCH!!!! You know, kudo-comment-interaction, SEE YOU ON FRIDAY!!!! And many, MANY thanks for everything :D SEE YOU SOON *hugs and kisses*

Chapter 22: First designs, first steps (of something new)

Chapter Notes

YUHUUUUUUU HELLO, WHATSUPPP??? I LOVE YOU ALL. THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR EXISTING ON THE SAME EXISTENTIAL PLANE AS ME. I APPRECIATE YOU ARE ALIVE AND SHARING THIS JOURNEY WITH ME, MHAW ;D

Chapter warnings: more "my mental health isn't bad" from someone clearly depressed; I just discovered that technically it could be called self-stigma. And all the internalized ableism too.
Also, someone mentioned anhedonia in relation to SY's depression and YESSSSSS *applause*

Enjoy the chapter!! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan assumes that the fact that his brother waited until breakfast the next day to give two warning messages and a call is a triumph in itself for Jiu-ge.

“So?” Shen Jiu says on the other end of the line. “Are you going to continue with your therapy?”

“Good morning, Jiu-ge,” Shen Yuan says, a mocking smile playing on his face. He’s leaning against the counter, watching Luo Binghe have a very interesting duel learning how to use the microwave because he forgot to defrost the pork the night before, almost enjoying watching him lose to something as simple as technology. It’s not that Shen Yuan won’t help him, but for now, it’s fun to watch. “I slept very well. Thank you very much for asking and worrying about me, my rest, and my…”

“Will you going to continue, yes or no?”

Shen Yuan snorts. He rolls his eyes, and although Jiu-ge can't see it, Shen Yuan is sure he can imagine it.

“Yes,” he admits. Whatever Jiu-ge was going to say hangs so silently on the other end of the line that Shen Yuan has to check that the call hasn’t dropped. It’s still there, second by second marked by silent tension. “It wasn’t that unpleasant, you know?” And with a smile and the most irritating tone of voice he has, he simply says, “He had *snakes* in his office. They’re called Snow and White, but the receptionist, A-Zhu, wanted to name them Pain and Panic. They’re *incredible.* Did you know that snakes can live quite happily in captivity as long as their basic needs are met? Give them a warm lamp, a comfortable place, water, food, and they’ll adapt and live happily for long, long years; they’re so easy to tame. These were quite

large, though I don't know if they were male and female. Oh! Do you think if they lay an egg, I could get one? Do you think Chengle would like it…?"

"*Oh my God, no,*" Shen Jiu hisses on the other end. The silence is broken by an abrupt groan, and Shen Yuan hears Yue Qi's distant voice, as if Jiu-ge had put his phone down. "Yes, it's your fault, you bastard! Didn't you say he's a good professional, you-…?!"

"He's good!" Shen Yuan hears Yue-ge's voice in the distance, and chuckles a little. "He's the best in his field. I checked personally all his references. He had *that* scandal twenty years ago, but you know, it's the *only thing* on his reputation, and I didn't think you'd care…"

"Of course *not*," Jiu-ge mumbles. And another thumping sound. Shen Yuan can almost imagine his brother rolling up the newspaper and hitting Yue-ge over the head with it like a dog that's done something wrong. Ridiculous, but easy to visualize, especially considering Jiu-ge is one of those bitter adults who still reads a paper newspaper while eating breakfast. "What kind of references did you check, you big idiot? He keeps snakes in his damn office!"

"Actually," Shen Yuan says, thoroughly amused, "his nephew, the receptionist, has them. He feeds them and takes care of the terrarium. I think if I can get close to him, *maybe* he'll let me hold one."

"No fucking way!" Jiu-ge raises his voice so loudly that even Luo Binghe raises his head from where he's been examining the microwave, one eyebrow raised. "Why can't you be…!? Coherent, mature, adult!? Ugh!"

Shen Jiu hangs up the phone, and Shen Yuan finds himself chuckling. He puts his phone aside, fascinated by how fun it is to tease his brother—but not as fun as seeing Luo Binghe's puzzled face. Ah, his poor heart, it won't be able to handle these ridiculous gap moe.

"He'll get over it," Shen Yuan shrugged. Then he sighed and walked over to Luo Binghe: "Here, look. If you touch this button here, it unfreezes. You have to touch this one first, and then…"

He explains patiently and with a good sense of humor, amused at having angered Jiu-ge with his own schemes. Luo Binghe learns successfully, just as he can learn things; anyway, it's not that difficult to learn how to use the microwave properly, even with all the buttons on it! Shen Yuan learned in about three or four days. Obviously, the Protagonist will have to learn in less time.

"Yuan-ge likes snakes?" Luo Binghe asks after successfully defrosting the meat. Shen Yuan shrugs slightly.

"They're interesting," he hums in response. "I also like more pissing Jiu-ge off. I was sure he had no idea which therapist he was sending me to just by walking in there."

Doctor Jun hadn't been... bad, per se. He'd had a strange approach: halfway through the session, Shen Yuan realized that it actually felt *different* from a clinical session or any other medical consultation he'd ever had before. It was like complaining about random things to Airplane, answering every question that didn't even border on invasive, just a follow-up

guiding him to specific points of his complaints. Doctor Jun had only made the occasional comment, seeming focused and preoccupied with taking a long stack of notes that he flipped almost absentmindedly with his ridiculous pom-pom pen.

He'd even given him homework. *Homework.* Incredible.

“Sounds like someone… interesting to piss off,” Luo Binghe hums, now mixing the vegetables with the thawed meat for the filling. Shen Yuan is amazed that he’s using it all; in fact, he thinks Luo Binghe will probably make another huge batch of dumplings for the stockpile. They’ve already emptied the stockpile, and not a single one has gone to waste. “So, if weren’t the snakes, what does Yuan-ge like more?”

Shen Yuan has to bite his tongue to keep from replying with something like, 'I already had too much therapy yesterday.' It's not like he's explained *too much* to Luo Binghe*;* he thinks he should, at some point, it's just… admittedly humiliating. How come so many people in his family think his head is messed up that they've probably even been talking behind his back, looking for therapists and checking references so they'll have one ready and waiting for Shen Yuan whenever he agrees? Were they think that he was so crazy? He was perfectly normal!

He just takes a breath, shrugs, and looks away.

“Snakes are good,” he says, because suddenly he can’t think of anything else. *What* does he like? He thinks of tigers, but in fact, he didn’t used to like tigers that much until he associated them with Chengle. Then, he can’t help seeing things about tigers and thinking of his sweet boy. But before…? “Oh,” he says, surprising himself when he remembers. It feels like finding something at the back of a storeroom, and even when Shen Yuan remembers himself and recalls all the irrelevant facts, it still feels too distant and alien. “Well. Tasmanian devils.”

“Tasmanian *devils*?” Luo Binghe asks, his voice clearly amused. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, very funny,” he snorts, fiddling with his walking stick in his hand. Despite having gone out the day before, it’s not a particularly bad day. He’s been more exhausted on rainy days. “They’re not too big, you know? Barely bigger than a very fat cat. But they bite with the strength of a wolf,” and he finds himself smiling as he speaks, quickly searching his phone for pics so he can show Binghe. When was the last time he talked about something like this with *someone*? “They're like tiny, muscular, snub-nosed little dogs, but they scream—God, they scream like they're being *killed*. They're scavengers, and they make so much noise when they're eating that it's almost like they're some enormous, extremely dangerous beast. Oh! And they run around like little balls of rage, full of hate. They have short little legs, and they *squeal*. They're so wild, but the way you see them, they're much more boisterous than dangerous. They're very shy around humans, actually, so they don't pose much of a danger, but… well, their screams have a horrible reputation.”

Shen Yuan looks up from his phone and almost drops it. Luo Binghe has moved closer, but instead of staring at the screen as Shen Yuan had expected, he's staring at him. The expression on his face is relaxed, his brows soft, and for a moment Shen Yuan knows nothing but to grip his phone tightly in a trembling hand. His heart is in his throat, and Luo Binghe is so, so close that he can almost feel the touch of his breath.

“So,” Luo Binghe says, his voice soft and low. Shen Yuan feels the hair on the back of his neck prickling, his mouth growing so dry he struggles to swallow. “Yuan-ge likes dangerous and unwieldy creatures?”

Shen Yuan has to force himself to breathe and find the proper functioning of his tongue, which is too heavy in his mouth, to say: “As long as you don’t bring one into my house, yes.”

Luo Binghe smiles. Laughter gently shakes his shoulders.

“This Lord understands,” he hums. Shen Yuan feels almost physical relief as Luo Binghe walks away, straight back to his dumpling filling. At the same time, he is struck by a ridiculous indignation. ‘This Lord understands’? He understands what, on earth!? Shen Yuan is certain there is nothing difficult to understand in the brief information he has been given!

He sulks a little, moving away until he sits in the chair that now seems to remain constantly in the kitchen. Luo Binghe hasn't moved it and neither has Shen Yuan, so he just sits. He replies to a couple of inane messages that Airplane left for him at some insanely late hour and browses the forums a bit, rolling his eyes at the sheer number of people mentioning him in posts and forums theorizing about his disappearance in the community. He replies to a couple with, '*Sadly I'm alive, idiots. You won't get rid of me that quickly,*' which causes his inbox to fill with more messages and notifications from people he doesn't know, relieving. Bah. Over-the-top and dramatic.

Airplane has continued to write. They aren't daily updates, but they're papapa extras that sell quite well, apparently, even if Shen Yuan hasn't read a word of them. Also apparently, according to comments or posts on PIDW subforums, Airplane is addressing wife-conquest extras that he didn't develop during the Abyss Arc and, for those pushing wilder theories, an exaggerated amount of “*what if”* extras that seems to have driven a lot of fans crazy.

One comment in particular among the most recent comments, highly responded to by similar reactions and with a high score, catches his attention:

PetalsThatOpenForOtherPetals:

When the narration began with the Abyss opening I said, shit, here we go again, but when Shen Qingqiu stabbed him in the chest and Luo Binghe started begging, my reaction was like ??? Boy what. At WHAT point would Luo Binghe BEG the scum villain!? He didn’t even do it at the edge of the Abyss, resigned to the fact that Shen Qingqiu would have no mercy on him!!! Why would he do that NOW? Cry, when he never cried since that first time in Qing Jing!!! Airplane-sama, PeerlessCucumber would be insulting you right now, what the hell!!!

What is this, really, awesome masterpiece of a weirdo new perspective?! What do you mean by ‘sweet memories of mornings with his Shizun that would never be repeated’? PARDONNNN MEEEEE???? What is going ON? Shen Qingqiu stabs him in the CHEST, and then, what ‘red reflection in his master’s dark eyes before he fell’?? What if about Shen Qingqiu, the demon?? Is this what we are talking about? DYING!!! /positive

Shen Yuan stares at the comment with an irritated expression. He reads several similar replies, all theorizing on what kind of ‘*what* if’ this is exactly, talking about how *it would*

make sense that in some AU where the Scum Villain was a demon who could figure out Luo Binghe's heritage just by looking at him, making sense of his self-loathing hatred. Being recent comments, they're from the most recent update, which happens to have been two days ago with nothing else posted. Shen Yuan feels a huge twitch in his eyelid that gets worse as he realizes he's going to have to read the whole damn chapter to get a coherent idea without going through other people's opinions to understand *what the hell* Airplane has done now.

Then, take a screenshot and send it to Airplane.

ShenY: [image]

ShenY: ?????

ShenY: What the hell is this?

At eight in the morning, it's obvious that Airplane isn't responding.

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

It's only after breakfast, when Luo Chengle has taken direct possession of the coffee table with its pile of colored crayons, children's scissors, children's glue, and many children's room decoration magazines for him to make a collage of what things he would like in his new room, that Luo Binghe moves a little closer to Shen Yuan and calls him into the room to give them a vague attempt at privacy, his expression so nervous as to be impossible.

Luo Binghe, nervous about something? But the truth is, he has no other way to describe it, with his eyebrows slightly furrowed, his hands wringing the dishcloth so tightly that the tension in the tendons above his hands is evident, and the clear tension in his shoulders.

“This Lord has prepared enough food for the next few days,” Luo Binghe begins, his voice slightly hesitant. “Especially easy to make and heat. Dumplings separated into different containers according to their fillings, congee, savory crepes, stuffed buns that only need to be steamed. There are pre-cut vegetables, seasoned meat and fish in case Chengle wants them…”

His gaze wavers. The expression on his face… Well, it's clear that Luo Binghe is certainly tense; the deep dark circles under his eyes are gone, or at least not so deep that they look tattooed. His face looks a little brighter, but it's clear that between his furrowed brows and the way his posture is stiff, something's bothering him.

“You did well,” Shen Yuan says, patting him on the shoulder. The tension only increases a little, and Shen Yuan leans in slightly, curious. “Is Binghe feeling good?”

“This one…” Luo Binghe swallows. Shen Yuan watches the way his throat rises and falls with the movement closely, paying attention to every little detail, trying to identify anything abnormal. It’s not like Luo Binghe can get sick, right? Not from normal, mundane illnesses,

of course, but how could he catch some kind of PIDW sickness while being here? His eyes don't look feverish, though the skin on his cheeks looks a little pinker and… "Yuan-ge."

"Tell me?"

Luo Binghe takes a deep breath. He lowers his head, and Shen Yuan loses the strange, ridiculous privilege of looking him at his eyes.

"This Lord must go," he says, and Shen Yuan blinks, confused. Well, Luo Binghe has been coming and going randomly, so why would it be any different…? "For a while."

"Oh," Shen Yuan blinked, suddenly understanding. Yes, Luo Binghe came every other day, sometimes for a couple of hours a day; sometimes he came in the morning and returned in the mid-afternoon. But he always came back. He had always come back. "I understand. It's true that Binghe mustn't neglect his responsibilities."

"Yes," Luo Binghe says. He swallows again, and after a deep breath that seems to be building up his courage, Luo Binghe says, "Come with me."

Shen Yuan blinks. He swallows the abrupt *"what*," trying to process what's going on. Well. Of course, Luo Binghe is there, clearly… nervous, asking him to come with him. To his world. To the palace. To… to this whole unknown, chaotic universe that Shen Yuan only knew about in writing, and even in writing, he knew how devastatingly dangerous it could be.

On the one hand, he supposes it would be… positive for Chengle. He'd get a chance to see his mother, and Shen Yuan might have a few, um, *words* with some of the other kids' mothers. Nothing serious. Not that he has any authority, but still, would it be like those awkward parent-teacher conferences between the overprotective dad of the adorable kid and the shrewd mom who lets her spoiled children bully everyone else? Shen Yuan knows that no kind of scenario that starts with those characters could end in anything less than a horrendous argument.

He could meet Liu Mingyan, make sure she was feeling better, greet Sha Hualing and receive all her increasingly affectionate threats face to face, see how Mu Qingfang's investigations were going, watch Chengle play with his little siblings...

But on the other hand–

Luo Binghe's expression darkens with each passing moment Shen Yuan remains silent. It's not the kind of sinister shadow that paints him as a mighty Demon Emperor on a rampage, but as if every moment Shen Yuan hesitates, he's crushing each and every one of his dreams with a massive stone.

Shen Yuan can only sigh.

"I'm not saying *no*," he begins, and just a hint of something close to hope flickers in Luo Binghe's eyes. "Just, not *yet*. Okay? Chengle needs some normalcy now. I don't think, right now, it's healthy for him to come back, even with me." He grimaces, remembering the crying, the tantrums. His poor, sweet boy. Shen Yuan isn't too sure that being even a world

away from the palace is enough for his poor son in the volatile state he's been in. "Also, I should arrange for Airplane to stay and look after the apartment, prepare a stockpile of medicine for me, uh, probably leave my phone with Airplane too, so that he can answer the family's messages without raising suspicions that I'm not there…"

Shen Yuan realizes he's babbling nonsense and falls silent. However, when he dares to glance at Luo Binghe's face, he finds his expression almost relieved. The outline of a smile has begun to form on his face, and far from the shadowing of his expression, his eyes are almost too bright.

Nope, Shen Yuan isn't going to tolerate any more gap moe today. Seriously, his poor heart…

"Yuan-ge *would like* to come with me," he says, and relief at his words hits Shen Yuan. Oh, really, what is this? He reaches out to pat the side of Luo Binghe's head a little, almost on his cheek, because it's as far as he can go without ridiculously reaching above his head. "This Lord is grateful. This one is so, so grateful."

"Yeah, yeah," Shen Yuan pats him gently again. "Really, it's nothing. You caught me off guard. If we'd talked about it in advance, we could have consulted with Chengle and seen if he'd be comfortable with it. I don't think he'd feel comfortable going right now," he admits, grimacing. He doesn't want to see his boy cry again, and especially not like the last time. Then he takes a deep breath, straightening his posture slightly. If Luo Binghe leaves… "But you'll have to tell him now that you're leaving for a while. Tell him how long you think it will take, not an exact date you'll be back. And if you can explain what you're going to do and why it will take time—not that you prefer that time away from him—that's even better."

Luo Binghe nods. Shen Yuan reminds himself, his ears burning with embarrassment, to lower his hand. Now his entire arm feels tense and uncomfortable, so he clasps both hands behind his back, almost nervous.

"This Lord will do it," he promises, nodding. "This one doesn't plan on taking more than some how many days. This one needs…" and he grimaces, "to sort things out, take care of things, revise…"

"Yes, I know, I know," Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. It's a little easier to mock Luo Binghe when he's nervous than at any other time. "Great responsibilities of a Great Lord Demon Emperor. Oh, my benevolent Junshang, you mustn't explain yourself to this lowly one, as long as you return to grace him with your presence soon."

Shen Yuan bows very, very mockingly, clearly with a sly and mocking expression on his face. Unlike other times, Luo Binghe doesn't look sulking or annoyed at being mocked. Now, Luo Binghe smiles a little, as if the amusement is also spreading to his eyes.

"This Lord will return so soon that Yuan-ge won't even begin to miss him," he says, all those honeyed words not sounding like a mockery at all; they actually sound like a promise.

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. The smile he feels on his own face is too wide and strong against his cheeks to be erased anytime soon.

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Luo Binghe does exactly as Shen Yuan asked. He takes a seat opposite Chengle and explains that he has to go to the palace to take care of political matters for a few days, but that he will be back soon. Chengle sulks and complains a lot, but in Shen Yuan's eyes, Luo Binghe handles it well: he doesn't raise his voice or make any sudden movements. Finally, after promising to return and clearly bribing the boy with the promise of bringing him more sugary coal candies and new things to play with, Luo Binghe gets his son to agree that he is not being abandoned for this time.

Only when Chengle is no longer so sulky and agrees to say him goodbye does Luo Binghe put on his robes – one of every pair Shen Yuan has now found a place for in his closet – and with his sword in hand crackling with a dense energy that makes Shen Yuan's skin crawl, Luo Binghe says his goodbyes and leaves, this time using a portal directly into the room, away from Chengle. Behind him, the room goes eerily silent for a long moment, and Shen Yuan can't help but feel a strange, intense choking sensation against his throat.

Well. It wasn't that Luo Binghe wasn't running around all the time—in fact, he was all the time. Only this, Shen Yuan noted after a long, uncomfortable breath, was the first time that just drawing the sword had made his stomach feel so sick. It made sense that he wouldn't even want to make the sword appear near his son.

Xin Mo had indeed given him goosebumps at times, the sensation of the sword slicing through the air and the sinister portal connecting universes behind it being a vile, unstable thing. However, just by wielding it in his hand, Shen Yuan was already feeling almost physically unwell. Without getting closer, without more than being a safe distance from where Luo Binghe would set up his portal!

And yet, he had been affected so severely. Shen Yuan can't get it out of his head – if that's the effect Xin Mo had on him, *how bad would it be for Luo Binghe?*

Shen Yuan collapses onto the bed, taking as deep a breath as he can. His breath catches in his throat, as if there are still shreds of that visceral void between realities that Luo Binghe had summoned to return to his palace. His stomach lurches, and for a moment, fear makes him feel ridiculous and pathetic. No, *he's not going* to develop a fear of stomach pain. Just…

It's just…

What nonsense. Shen Yuan snorts, rubbing his eyes with his palms. Luo Binghe always leaves and always comes back. What's the difference here, what's the difference *now*? That he'll be gone for more days? What has clearly made his leaving this time different from the previous times? He should be *used* to it. He's been alone, and then alone with Chengle, who, although it's a companion, is more of a great responsibility. He just… He should be used to it.

Instead, the emptiness that the silent room suddenly leaves behind is like a constant echo: in the free space next to the bed, in the closet with the half-open door where he can still see Luo Binghe's clean clothes that he has just put away, in the dirty clothes basket on small wheels that he can never fill more than halfway because it is so difficult to carry it now that it now contains all the clothes that Luo Binghe has just taken off to put on his robes.

Shen Yuan drags his hand down his face and sighs. Seriously, how melodramatic. Who knew sharing time and space with a Demon Emperor would make him prone to melodrama? Is that a passive skill? If Luo Binghe was going to infect him with something, couldn't it be some badass points or something?

The silence and absence feel suffocating.

Luo Binghe is *Luo Binghe*. He's a father, a sometimes pleasant roommate, an exceptional cook, and someone who doesn't fully understand movies. *He's* the Luo Binghe Shen Yuan read about. But *is he*? Because the Luo Binghe that Shen Yuan read about...

No, no, besides, what does that matter now? Shen Yuan rolls sideways in bed, hugging one of Chengle's stuffed tigers. He can smell the scent of the kid's shampoo, and he finds himself grinning through a stupid, ridiculous lump in his throat. What the fuck, what's wrong with him? He's being so over-the-top and melodramatic!

Luo Binghe has to go, and that's fine! Take charge of the Palace, of the people under his command, the…!

Of Xin Mo. Of his wives. Because of course he has his huge harem of more of 300 wives that he's been neglecting and he probably needs all that marathonic papapa to be able to placate that pesky sword of his and be able to make sure he has it at its maximum power to keep making all those portals and going back and forth, because of course Luo Binghe *needs* all those wives, he needs to placate Xin Mo, he has all those *many* marital obligations to fulfill and...

Shen Yuan buries his face hard in the stuffed tiger. The wail comes out almost as if he were crying; he doesn't even have the strength to scream.

“Baba Yuan?”

Shen Yuan quickly raises his head. Chengle is a tiny little thing peeking through the door, looking at him with big, worried eyes.

“Chengle,” Shen Yuan exhales, running his hand over his face. Is it wet? The tiger must have been wet. Shen Yuan tries to remember if he let Chengle sleep with wet hair last night; he’s not entirely sure. “Sweetheart, are you good?”

Luo Chengle approaches with tiny steps.

“Is Baba Yuan in pain?” he asks. Shen Yuan looks at him, confused. “Shall we call Uncle Ai-plein? And nurse?”

“No, no, darling,” Shen Yuan stands up, wiping the last traces of wetness from his face with his sleeve. Everything is fine. *Everything is fine.* “I’m fine, nothing’s wrong. Look, look.”

He stands up. It's true, he realizes. The pain is a subtle shadow in the background, something that doesn't even bother him unless he pushes it too hard. He doesn't even need to use his cane to reach the boy, and yet, Chengle's pout trembles.

“I promise I'm fine,” he says to his sweet little boy, ruffling his hair with his hand. “How's your collage going? Did you pick out some nice furniture?”

Chengle hesitates a little, but nods. “A few,” he says softly, and takes Shen Yuan’s hand in his own. “Baba Yuan has to come and see.”

Shen Yuan nods, grateful more than ever for Chengle existing in his life like a beautiful ray of light. He sits on the sofa and lets the boy show him the collection of furniture he's cut out and pasted onto different sheets that appear to form a room. Almost all of it is chaotic, but they share a kind of order within the chaos: there are toys among the furniture, things of sizes that obviously aren't appropriate for the space they would occupy, but Chengle is someone who is quite orderly about it. He's decided that his room has to be light green, apparently, and a lot of light-looking furniture should fit those colors, although some of it has been painted over with crayons in a clear ‘this piece of furniture would be a different color’.

Shen Yuan proudly reviews all the collages, mentally organizing which ones might be more feasible in terms of utility vs. decoration, and he's just doing that when Chengle says in a soft, low voice:

“Baba Yuan doesn’t have to be sad,” he says. Shen Yuan tilts his head, a little confused, and Chengle seems emboldened by that, because he continues, “When Father Emperor leaves, I do get sad. It hurts here,” and he touches his chest. Shen Yuan can feel his own heart burning at having his cute little baby boy say this to him, “and it makes me so *angry*. I don’t like that it hurts. I don’t like that *he can* make me hurt,” and his pout trembles a little. Just a little, because his brave, strong boy takes a deep breath and says, “But Father Emperor promised he’ll come back. And he has to keep his word! Or I’m going to hate him forever, and he’ll never get to marry Baba Yuan.”

Shen Yuan finds himself laughing, a burst of idiotic laughter that wells up from deep within him. He realizes, with relief, that the laughter makes the lump in his throat feel lighter.

“You have a thing about weddings, huh,” he complains playfully, pulling Chengle into a tight hug. “Come on, let’s do a collage of a living room now. How would you like it to look?”

They spend the rest of the day cutting out furniture, gluing, and making lots of different sheets, mixing crayons, clippings, and decorations that go from looking as elegant as Jiu-ge's house to chaotic and pointless. Shen Yuan doesn't even notice the passage of time until he gets a little hungry, and when he starts cooking some dumplings for Chengle, he realizes with a somewhat ridiculous degree of relief that Luo Binghe is really coming back soon. He won't even be long: there isn't enough food to last more than a week. Maybe less.

He places the plates on the coffee table among their clippings, and while his sweet son eats with a children's channel playing in the background, adorably paying half attention to his food, Shen Yuan settles into the couch, occasionally spooning his mashed vegetables, and finally making up his mind, opens the real estate website on his phone. After all, what's the point of planning all those new rooms if there aren't any proper places for them to set up them?

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There's no sign of Luo Binghe the next day. It's easy for Luo Chengle to be the effusive, clingy little boy he is without his father around to sour his mood: they watch movies, Chengle plays Just Dance, Shen Yuan takes the daily notes Doctor Jun left him as homework. They eat and receive a surprise visit from Yue Qi, bearing some sweaters with embroidered kittens he found for Chengle.

Yue Qi doesn't stay long, gives his gifts, and leaves. Then, before nightfall, Shen Yuan invites Airplane to stay, using the lame excuse that he's in some pain. It's not that he's lying: he's always in a little pain, even more so since he can't take the dose he's used to taking of painkillers. He hasn't dared disobey Jiu-ge or even look at what dose he's taking; a tiny part of his head, a tiny thing that wriggles like a worm, seems to be whispering to him that if he sees how low his dose is, his pain will be *worse.*

Shen Yuan ignores him. When Airplane arrives with his backpack, Shen Yuan complains only a little to him about these weird *what-if* extras and how Airplane doesn't need to keep making narrative crap just for the money, and then forces him to sit on the couch where he and Chengle watch movies. Shen Yuan even orders a couple of bags of microwave popcorn that Chengle and Airplane devour while watching Despicable Me 1 and 2. Shen Yuan is immensely relieved that Chengle finds Gru funnier than the Minions because he honestly doesn't want a Minion invasion of his house.

Airplane stays that night. He's a little hesitant in the morning, and Shen Yuan is slow to realize that it's precisely because Shen Yuan invited him to stay under the pretext that he was in a lot of pain. Well, he*'s not going* to pretend to be in more pain than he is, but he finds no discomfort in sitting back and letting Airplane take care of everything; after all, that's what he called him for, and Airplane seems very happy to have his hands full.

It turns out to be a surprisingly relaxing day. Airplane and Chengle play with the tigers, and then they make a pillow fort with all the pillows in the house on the sofa, including Shen Yuan in the middle. Airplane tells tales of PIDW beasts—and Shen Yuan is extremely sure he's making some up in the process, and doesn't even want to think about what that means for the universe Luo Binghe comes from.

That night, when Shen Yuan sleeps, he is more relaxed than usual, and his heart is a little lighter. When he wakes up, he blinks lazily and takes a long moment to realize that he isn't actually awake.

It's not his apartment. He recognizes and disrecognizes the small cottage at the same time: it's riddled with gaps in the thatched roof, and the window barely has a frame bent and swollen by the rains. He can hear the flow of a river nearby. The bed Shen Yuan gets up from is nothing more than a futon lined with rough rags, and although he feels no pain sleeping on the floor, he can perfectly feel the coldness of the earth through the mat, the roughness and stiffness of the fabric against his palms.

Shen Yuan stands, fascinated by the utter relief. There's no pain, nothing real. He doesn't have his cane nearby, either, so he fiddles with the hem of his pajama sleeve. It's not his dream, he realizes, but he doesn't want to get lost in it either; he needs something to hold on to.

Outside, it's practically rural; it’s not far from a river, and Shen Yuan assumes that if it floods, that little cottage might very well be flooded. The riverbank is lined with tall, yellowish grass. The climate is dry.

“No, no, no!” Shen Yuan hears a small voice. “I don’t want to!”

The small voice is hidden in some bushes. Among them, there is also a woman; Shen Yuan is startled. The woman's features are strangely bland, almost blurred and difficult to see. As soon as he realizes it, his heart squeezes with pain. The woman's face could be any face, her features any features. There is nothing about her familiar or even noticeable except for her long gray braid and the soft grimace of her smile.

“It’s time to go,” says the old washerwoman, bending down toward the child hiding in the bushes. “The game is over; this old woman has already found her little one. Now let’s go home.”

“No, no!” the little voice repeats again. The boy peeks out from between the bushes, a mass of fluffy, unruly curls. The sweet boy is so identical to Chengle for a moment, down to his big eyes and pouting mouth, that it burns Shen Yuan inside. He’s a little younger than Chengle, too, or maybe just much thinner and malnourished than him, due to his tiny size. “I don’t want to! If I go home, Ma will be gone away! I don’t want to!”

“Master Feng’s clothes are waiting for me,” the old woman says, still smiling wearily. “And Bing’er is still too young to keep up with me. If this old Ma don’t go to work, who will bring the rice to the table? Aren’t my little son craving some warm rice porridge tonight?”

“No!” the boy squeals, hiding in the bushes. “No, no! I don’t want rice! I want Ma!”

The old woman laughs a little. She pulls the child as far as she can, but almost falls. The child shakes his head, completely stubborn.

“If you don’t obey,” the old woman warns, her voice trying to be stern; she succeeds quite well, like any old woman who wants to, “the river spirits will hear you and transform you into a toad.”

“I like toads!” the boy says. His voice is loud and determined, and Shen Yuan finds himself covering his mouth to keep from laughing out loud. “I’ll be a happy toad! If I’m a toad, Ma can hide me in her apron! And Ma will never leave me again!”

The old woman shakes her head, amused.

“Oh, stubborn boy. If you choose to be a toad, you’ll never find a wife. *No one* wants to marry a toad,” the old woman warns. Little Luo Binghe opens his large eyes in a grimace of clear *horror*. “Do you really want that sad, lonely fate?”

The boy's pot trembles. Before the old woman can say anything else, he bursts into tears. The woman clearly seems used to this, laughing warmly as she pulls the boy's arms and carries him with great effort against her body. Her elderly body slouches, almost trembling, as she carries the crying child in her arms.

“I don’t want to!” hiccups the little one. “I don’t want to be a toad! I don’t want to be alone forever! I want Ma!”

“Shhh, enough, enough,” the old woman soothes him with pats on his back. “Your old Ma won’t let you.” And then, with her tender old lady woman, she says: “Look at your face, you stubborn boy, so swollen from crying. You really look like you’re already starting to turn into a toad. You must have upset one of those river spirits with all those tears.”

“Ma! *Nooo*! I don’t want to be a toad!”

Shen Yuan covers his mouth with both hands to keep from laughing out loud. He feels the presence behind him before he actually sees it.

“You were a lovely child, indeed,” he says to Luo Binghe. He turns to look at him, and the adult Luo Binghe is wearing all his Emperor robes. There’s an unfathomable expression on his face as he watches the crying child in his mother’s arms in the distance, and the blurry-faced woman rocking him to calm him. “Did you bring me here, or did I attract here by accident?”

“This Lord doesn’t accidentally attract people into his dreams,” Luo Binghe says, sounding like he’s trying to defend himself against something he’s clearly done. His eyes are stern as he looks down at the squirming child in the arms of a mother who can barely manage to carry the thrashing child in her arms. “Yuan-ge is mistaken. That Emperor was an absolute brat. He demanded a tired mother’s time, made her work harder to please me, ate food she could barely bring herself to eat, and was of no use except for misfortune.”

Shen Yuan sighs. “You were just a child,” he says, looking into the teary eyes of little Luo Binghe in his mother’s arms. “You had the right to be unruly.”

They both watch as the old woman, after much effort, manages to get little Binghe to stay inside the cottage. She goes out and closes it, warning the boy not to open the door to strangers, not to believe anyone who wants to sell him something or pick him up by telling him they know his mother, and *not to go out*.

“You’ll go out, right?” Shen Yuan asks. Luo Binghe, beside him, nods. His face is sad.

“She loved me even though nothing forced her to,” he says, his expression complex. “She was… the only one who did. This Lord… I did nothing for her. She starved herself to feed me, hurt her back carrying me, bled her hands from bringing clothes to dress me and coins to buy more for me. Everything was for me. She wasn’t forced, but she did it.”

Luo Binghe falls silent. Shen Yuan does too. The scenery remains the same, with the gentle breeze and the moist scent of the wet earth following the river crossing.

“She would be disappointed in me,” Luo Binghe says, so abruptly it sounds like a blow. “Who I’ve become.”

Shen Yuan opens his mouth, ready to say anything, when he discovers that he actually has nothing he can say. He can't deny it. He can't deny the absolute truth that if that woman with

her compassionate heart and tired hands were to see everything Emperor Luo Binghe has done, the adult who has grown up to be the child she loved and cared for, she would be very, very sad about it.

“I’m sorry,” he says instead. Luo Binghe lowers his gaze. He doesn’t watch as the boy, clearly not obeying his mother, sneaks out of the house and runs back to chase the path his mother had made. Shen Yuan recalls, with a bitter shadow that now takes on new meaning, that Luo Binghe’s old washerwoman mother had lost many jobs. Now, seeing the boy clearly sneaking out to chase after her and be with her, surely sneaking into the house of some rich master in the village with his little catastrophic protagonist halo of accumulating traumas that would make anything bad that could happen, happen, he can understand *why* the old woman lost so many jobs during the time she lived with her little son.

“I was never a good son,” Luo Binghe says, his tone simply resigned. “Nor a good disciple. Nor a good husband. Nor a good father. Nor a good person.”

“At least you’re a good Emperor,” Shen Yuan has to mock, and even Luo Binghe rolls his eyes at that. The smile that curves his mouth has a humor that doesn’t reach his eyes.

“No one would say that if they weren’t afraid of dying by my hand if they said otherwise,” Luo Binghe says simply. Shen Yuan sighs, patting his arm. Really…

“You haven’t done things right. But the past is in the past,” Shen Yuan shrugs. “And the past, you can’t change it. You can only learn from it and do things better.”

“*And how* do I make things better?” Luo Binghe says after a tense moment. The sound of the river is almost too loud for his low voice. “How can I make *everything* better?”

“Little by little,” Shen Yuan says, trying to make his smile encouraging enough. “If you can already recognize what’s wrong, then you can know what *not to* do. How to do things differently. Better.”

“Yuan-ge is so wise,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. “This Lord means it. Yuan-ge is wise, and brave. And strong. Yuan-ge shouldn’t be so confident that this Lord is capable of feats as he has faith this one can do.”

“You are Luo Binghe,” Shen Yuan says simply. “If anyone can do it, it’s you.”

He supposes it doesn't make sense; not that he finds any particular sense in it, really. Luo Binghe is a person—a real person, living flesh beneath his hand, bones, red blood pumping through his veins. He was once a character, that is, perhaps? But now, in the midst of a dream of a world that isn't his own, against the backdrop of a story that isn't his own but that Shen Yuan knows so well he could recite it by heart, Luo Binghe is so real, so human, that Shen Yuan feels everything in his chest tremble.

“Yuan-ge trusts this one too much,” Luo Binghe says, looking away. He looks at the blurred path, washing away like a memory diluted by the edges of a novice’s ink on poor-quality paper. “This Lord cannot do anything but live up to Yuan-ge’s high expectations of him.”

Shen Yuan finds himself smiling. It's ridiculous, but he feels the smile curl across his face before he realizes he's smiling.

“Good,” he says, and Luo Binghe smiles back. “You have a son at house who pretends not to but is constantly checking to see if you’ve arrived. He almost asking last night.”

Luo Binghe's gaze is surprised at first. It's cute to see.

“Oh, he is?” he says, and his smile is much warmer. “How… How is he?”

“He’s been behaving well,” Shen Yuan hums, happy and proud. His sweet Chengle really has been. “We’ve been looking at new, more spacious apartments, a little bigger but *not too* big, so I don’t tire myself out walking around, you know. He’s also been making lots of collages of options for his bedroom furniture, when he gets one. He’s liking the option more and more. We’ve also watched some movies, he’s read a little…”

At one point, both Luo Binghe and he are sitting on some stones by the Luo River. The breeze is cool, gentle, and the warmth of the sun is tender. Shen Yuan feels his chest light and his heart light as he tells Luo Binghe all the little things he's been missing about Chengle, and when he looks at Luo Binghe and the genuine smile that spreads across his face, Shen Yuan feels a stupid, ridiculous feeling of being complete.

Chapter End Notes

SY: I have so many bottled-up feelings here that I really can't deal with the JEALOUSY on top of everything else

LCL: I hate Father Emperor and Baba Yuan is the best thing that ever happened to me and I want him happy and I want Father Emperor away from him
Also LCL: ...if Baba Yuan cries ONE more time because stupid Father Emperor left, I'm going to *mini violence thoughts of mini angry heavenly demon*

As someone with dysthymia, BRO, what a hard time it was to have SY suddenly remember something he used to like. It feels like digging out an old, comfy, soft sweater from the back of the closet that sometime ago you adored, but now even though you have memories of how cute it was, it doesn't feel the same. It's still comfy and soft, but the thrill of owning it exists only in a memory that doesn't even feel like yours. Writing that was like scratching a wound. Ouchhh

I keep thinking how smart and sweet some kids can be, just noticing little things that some adults don't. Chengle definitely has a LOT of thoughts regarding his sad Baba Yuan because his evil Emperor Father left. Will that help Binghe win his approval? No, yes, maybe, probably, who knows :P
Airplane arrived thinking he'd find SY prostrate in the bed and found a very angry Peerless Cucumber criticizing a chapter he hasn't even read except in fragments.

Honestly, a jumpscare, I'd run away
Also, Airplane, and those what-ifs? Spill the tea :P

I'm such a fan of Binghe's washerwoman mother. I adore her, mama adopt me too, I promise I'll behave. In my mind, she and Hua Cheng's mother own a clothing store in Ghost City and are best friends. I'll proceed to cry, excuse me
Binghe sees all the parallels there, and grieves. Chengle is the child most similar to him, the child he had the hardest time getting close to because of their enormous resemblance, like any great father who internally hates himself and can't handle indiscriminate projections. And there's his whiny, unruly son getting himself a sickly, weak ""mother"". Binghe's mind was/is having too much to deal with healthily. Besides, Freud would have some words here that *runs away from the crowd*

HEY, I HOPE YOU LIKED THE CHAPTER A LOT!!!! SDKFNDSFN IT MADE ME HAPPY TO WRITING IT. I FINISHED WRITING IT ABOUT AN HOUR AGO, GOT A QUICKY EDIT AT IT, AND HERE I AM SHARING IT WITH YOU, MWAH. AS ALWAYS!!! THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR JOINING ME ON THIS GREAT JOURNEY CHAPTER BY CHAPTER. WOW. IN SHOCK FOR EVERYTHING WE'VE BEEN THROUGH AND HOW FAR WE'VE COME!!!!! Thank you so much for reading as always!!! I'm here kudos-comments-interactions so we can have some fun :P HUGS KISSES TAKE CARE I SEE YOU ON SUNDAY I LOVE YOU
SEE YOU SOON!!!! *HUGS*

Chapter 23: First return to home

Chapter Notes

> WOHOOO HELLO!! HOW WAS YOUR WEEKEND??? I HOPE YOU HAD A GREAT TIME!!! I'm trying to finish Natlan's quests to advance to Nod-Krai and stop giving myself spoilers on TikTok :P BY THE WAY, I know someone commented wanting to add me on Duolingo, but I don't remember which chapter it was and I can't find the comment, so feel free to add me as bingdeika on Duo. I promise I'll try my best :P
>
> Chapter warnings: self-stigma regarding mental health, denial of mental health issues, internalized ableism. I'm guessing internalized homophobia if you squint
>
> ENJOY THE CHAPTER!! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It feels like an eternity since Shen Yuan last out. He has thermal shirt on under his sweaters, the warmest fleece sweatshirt, he's even opted for a wool hat and gloves. Luo Chengle is bundled up, but Shen Yuan assumes the boy will come home completely sweaty underneath all those layers of clothing when his beady eyes spot the child, and he waves, both arms waving in the air.

"Yanshi! Yanshi!"

The boy is making a snowman. He's wearing a wool hat with little ears, and Shen Yuan can only laugh beneath his face mask as the boy lights up, beaming.

“Cheng-ge!”

Punctual as every Saturday, the boy and mother are there. There aren't too many people; the weather doesn't make anyone want to go out, if Shen Yuan is honest. He wouldn't have gone out if Airplane weren't suddenly too busy to take him, saying things so hastily that they sounded like meaningless excuses. The children playing snowball fights a little further also seem to recognize Chengle, because they all run up to greet him, like a large pack of wild puppies, almost knocking him to the ground when they jump on him to greet him.

Shen Yuan sighs, relaxing on the bench. He's wearing two pairs of pants and so many layers of clothing that he can barely feel the chill on the bench.

“Hello, rich stranger,” Yanshi’s mother mocks. Shen Yuan has to do a mental count to remember that her name is Li Xiaofeng. This time she’s not wearing her old shoes, but plush boots and a thick wool coat. Both look brand new. “It’s been a long time. How have you been? That babysitter of yours said you’ve been sick.”

Shen Yuan grimaces.

“Yeah, something like that.” It wasn’t like he was going to tell a stranger in the park about his current horrendous health. Hell, he couldn’t even walk the few blocks between the apartment and the park. He’d had to take a car, and it wasn’t important, except they’d arrived in almost five minutes. “But I’m getting better.”

That, at least, wasn't a lie. Shen Yuan is fully aware that his health has ups and downs throughout the year. It's true that his muscles swell more in winter, and he's more prone to body temperature or skin rash in summer, as well as rashes from sun exposure. Not counting his hospitalization and all the recovery he'd had in between, this winter was being... quite gentle on him, so to speak.

“That’s a relief,” the woman smiles. She crosses her legs, and Shen Yuan laughs a little as he notices the ridges of wool socks sticking out between the sag of her pants and the hem of his boots. They’re the same kind of warm wool socks he bought for Luo Binghe. “So, how have you been? How was the holiday season?”

“With my family,” Shen Yuan shrugs. He’s never been particularly good at socializing or small talk. “Food, gifts. The usual. And you?”

“Oh, his asshole father sent supermarket vouchers as gifts in a red envelope. The jerk.” Li Xiaofeng makes a dismissive gesture. Shen Yuan can only pity her. “Anyway, at my new job, they’ve been so considerate even though I’m the new face. Can you believe it? They gave me a holiday bonus and a big gift box, and I haven’t even been there a month. Apparently, my boss gives them to all the women in the office. Which is funny! Do you know that we’re almost all women there? I’ve never seen anything like that. At first, I thought he might be some kind of pervert—you know, what rich guy surrounds himself with women with no weirdo reasons? But he doesn’t even work at that office; we just work with his partner. Ah, he’s also so kind…”

Shen Yuan lets the woman carry on the conversation, making the appropriate vocal sounds that show he's paying attention to her without having to respond more than that. He assumes it's normal; he has no idea if she knows that Shen Yuan told Jiu-ge about her case so she could apply to HR, but from the way she expresses herself, she doesn't seem to have a clue.

“Ah, sorry, I must be boring,” Li Xiaofeng laughs a little, covering her mouth with her hand. She doesn’t have gloves on, and Shen Yuan notices that she’s painted her nails; it’s rather beautiful red, the kind of color his Meimei would wear. “My new job takes longer hours, but there’s a nursery, and Yanshi can play there after school. The children there are much gentler than those at his school, and he’s made some new friends. It makes me very happy for him.”

“He’s a good boy,” Shen Yuan comments, because he assumes it’s the right thing to say. If Chengle likes him so much, the kid can’t be bad anyway. “He deserves to have good friends.”

“That’s a huge relief,” she says with a sigh. Shen Yuan thinks Li Xiaofeng must be exhausted, but she also seems to have more energy than ever. “You know, rich stranger? If I had your number, we could take the kids to play somewhere where there’s no snow.”

“Oh,” Shen Yuan felt a little embarrassed. He didn’t really know much about… places with playground equipment. He guessed the Melands were there, but Shen Yuan hadn’t felt well enough to go there on his own with Chengle, especially considering that many of those playground equipment required parents and children to play together. Besides, the entry fee might be a bit steep for someone like Li Xiaofeng and her son for now. “Sure, of course.”

He almost drops his phone trying to get it out of his pocket. He has to take off the glove on one hand to unlock it and hand it to the woman so she can add her as a contact. He sends her a simple "Me" message so she can see his contact. Li Xiaofeng has a strange smile on his face; Shen Yuan, for some reason he can't quite place, is a little uncomfortable seeing it.

“Anyway,” he says, as quickly as he can, “we only went out today because Chengle couldn’t sit still anymore. And my babysitter is probably halfway to Macau with all the bad excuses he gave me for leaving early.”

Li Xiaofeng laughs a little, which is a huge relief, because Shen Yuan feels like he's run out of social energy. The chill reaches his bones even through all the layers of clothing he's put on, but watching Chengle run, being chased and chasing, in the middle of a catastrophic snowball fight is a huge relief.

He takes a few pics. He sends one to the family group, just because it's adorable: Chengle is wearing a wool hat Meimei gave him, and his hair is sticking up in all directions beneath it, having already escaped its braid. The photo is zoomed in and blurry, but judging by Luo Chengle's wide smile, it's one of the best pics Shen Yuan has taken in a long time.

Li Xiaofeng goes on to talk about something else; Shen Yuan keeps listening, making sounds urging her on. It’s… it’s calm, he supposes. The woman seems like a normal woman with a normal life, with plenty to complain about. In fact, she *has* every right to complain. A horrible ex-husband, until recently working at a job that paid her barely enough to survive, with a growing child with no friends in his school… ‘*She,’* Shen Yuan thinks, with something burning inside him in ways he can’t describe— ‘*she might have an excuse to be depressed, if she were.’*

He feels strangely struck. He swallows, makes more listening sounds, laughs nonchalantly at some silly joke. He continues taking pics of Chengle, and only when he exits the camera app does he realize he has an inordinate number of messages from Jiu-ge.

Curious, he opens them. It's a surprise, and not at the same time, that Jiu-ge calls him before he can even read the messages. He apologizes to Li Xiaofeng so he can answer the call.

“What’s up?” Shen Yuan says, and immediately has to pull the phone away from his face.

“Are you crazy!? Yes, you are, I don't know why I am asking! It snowed actively all night! And you're out there in that damn weather?! I swear if you get sick…!”

“Oh, I love you too. Thanks for worrying about me,” Shen Yuan mocks, and Jiu-ge falls so silent that Shen Yuan is laughing. “It’s cold, but I won’t freeze to death. It’s sunny every now and then, and Chengle is having fun. He needed to stretch his legs.”

“And where is his father, and that friend of yours? Couldn’t either of them…?” He’s silent for a long moment. Then he says, “He *no* left again. *He better be*, I swear to God, Shen Yuan, if that wretched bastard left again…”

“Uh,” Shen Yuan grimaces. “No, technically not. I mean, *he’s not* home right now for him to bring Chengle over, but, well, he went to take care of some work far and…” On the other end of the phone, Jiu-ge bursts out laughing, completely humorless. “I’m serious! *He’s coming* back.”

“God, you’re so…” Jiu-ge seems to be debating between ‘pathetic’ and ‘ridiculous’. Shen Yuan can only think he’s both. “And how long will it take this time? Two weeks, three?”

“He’ll be back early next week,” Shen Yuan says quickly. Jiu-ge laughs sullenly again on the other end. “That’s *true*. He left enough food for a few days. He promised Chengle he wouldn’t be long in returning.”

“And where did he go?” Jiu-ge asks, so hostile that Shen Yuan feels it like a blow. “To sleep with some new woman? Another one to his collection?”

“He doesn’t…” Shen Yuan wants to deny it, but his throat tightens. He doesn’t have the words to say anything else. He can’t say that Luo Binghe isn’t currently frolicking between the sheets of one of his wives, because that’s *probably* what he’s doing, and the feeling makes Shen Yuan feel almost physically sick. “He… will come back.”

“My God,” Shen Jiu seemed almost on the verge of collapse on the other end of the phone. “He would better. I’ll skin him alive with boiling water if he dare *not* come back.”

“You’ll have to find him first,” Shen Yuan mumbles, trying not to sound as if he’s still drowning. “It’s okay, Jiu-ge, really. *I know* he’ll be back. Soon. He hasn’t been that far—I mean, not even a week? He’ll be back soon this time. Honestly. I believe him.”

“Do you know how stupid you sound? Seriously.” Jiu-ge sounds absolutely frustrated. Shen Yuan sighs. “Anyway, you’re an idiot. Which park are you at? I’ll pick you up. Qi-ge was wanting to take that brat of yours somewhere to eat. He’s a softy and has already gotten used to being around. And you can eat some solids now. Miso ramen?”

“That would be nice,” Shen Yuan agrees, sighing. “Chengle likes ramen. Will you pick us up at eleven?”

“Send me you location. You better not get sick, or I'll have you *hospitalized.”*

Jiu-ge hangs out with one last threat. Shen Yuan sighs, putting his phone away and rubbing his hand over his face. When he looks up, he's surprised to see Li Xiaofeng looking at him with a… rather sad expression.

“Wow,” she says, and then again, as if processing, “Wow.”

“Sorry to interrupt you,” Shen Yuan says, sighing. “My brother… well, he’s a bit overprotective.”

“Yes, I heard something.” Li Xiaofeng laughs a little. Then, her expression seems to soften. “I… I wouldn’t want to pry or intervene. I know more than anyone how difficult it is when you’re going through something like this on your own and everyone has all these opinions and…” She shakes her head. Then she gives him a too-firm smile that makes Shen Yuan a little wary. “But whatever you’re going through, well. You’re not alone in this. You can count on me, you know.” She points at the children who are now rolling in the snow, trying to make a snowman around them. Shen Yuan is afraid they might succeed. “We must help each other. For them.”

“Thank you,” Shen Yuan says, because he has no idea what to say. Then, he clears his throat a little, trying to get rid of the awkward lump in his throat, and says, “Does Yanshi like cats? We could take them to a cat cafe…”

The change of subject is welcome. Li Xiaofeng doesn't bring up the subject again, and although she looks at him with pity, Shen Yuan is, after all, too used to pitying looks for this particular one to be relevant.

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Shen Jiu arrives promptly at eleven in the morning, demanding that they get to the car. Only then does Shen Yuan call Chengle, and they linger for at least ten minutes between saying goodbye to his friends, promising to see Yanshi again soon, and brushing all the snow off the boy before actually getting into Shen Jiu's car.

“Uncle Yue!” and the boy gives Shen Yuan a single playful glance before saying, with a small, sly smile as he looks at Shen Jiu, “Jiu-ge.”

“Brat,” Shen Jiu protests. “I’m your Uncle Jiu. Go on, say it.”

“Jiu-ge,” Chengle repeats, extremely proud of himself, and Shen Yuan is covering his mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

“Ah, Xiao Yuan,” Yue Qi reaches out from the front seat, offering him a covered disposable cup. “A hot green tea. Xiao Jiu ordered it from the office cafeteria for you.”

“Don’t you dare get sick,” Shen Jiu continues to threaten, which shouldn’t be a good fit with him behind the wheel. “And you, brat! I’m your Uncle Jiu! Respect your elders.”

Shen Yuan hides behind his cup and watches with indescribable joy as his brother is crushed by the stubbornness of a six-year-old. Chengle refuses to call Jiu-ge 'Uncle Jiu' no matter how many threats or bribes he makes. When they arrive at the restaurant, he still hasn't called him 'Uncle Jiu', and Shen Jiu seems resigned.

It's a nice family restaurant. Shen Yuan is enjoying a light miso ramen—not as rich as Luo Binghe's food, that's obvious—while Chengle is eating a ramen with creamy broth and lots of peanut sauce. He's a jovial, hungry kid too, because he also eats almost all of the dumplings Yue-ge ordered to share, and steals a couple of wontons from Jiu-ge's plate (though they're clearly too spicy for a kid, judging by his ugly face).

Shen Yuan is actually grateful that Jiu-ge lets him get at least halfway through his plate before snapping, “If you’re going to keep going with the therapy just to spite me, then just drop it. It’ll be a waste.”

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Yue-ge's expression is tense as he seems to be trying to distract Luo Chengle by showing him a game on his phone. As if Candy Crush could make the kid not hear what's happening right in front of him. Well, yes, *it might* work on ordinary kids, but it's Chengle! Of course he's going to listen.

“He’s a good therapist,” Shen Yuan says, shrugging. “CBT-type, which is better than Freud. He’s eccentric, and doesn’t look *anything* like a doctor. But I think he’s okay.” He slurps a couple of soft rice noodles under Jiu-ge’s watchful, accusatory gaze. “He’s not the kind of therapist I’d choose, but I don’t think I’d enjoy spending time with any other anyway.”

Shen Jiu lets out a weary sigh. He rubs his forehead, looking far more tired than angry. Though with Jiu-ge, he never knows for sure.

“At least *try,*” he insists, and Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

“I’m trying,” he says, even though his ears feel hot as he says it. “I’m doing the homework he left me and everything. I’m… really trying.”

He guesses his voice sounds genuine, because Jiu-ge visibly relaxes. He doesn't say anything else and picks up one of the wontons with his chopsticks, looking to the side. Chengle seems quite distracted by Candy Crush, though when Shen Yuan looks his way, the boy gives him a huge grin that makes Shen Yuan's foolish heart feel soft and tender.

Shen Yuan sighs finally. He takes a few more noodles and only when the tension at the table seems to ease a little does he ask Yue Qi, “Where did you get Dr. Jun from, by the way? He doesn’t seem like the type of therapist with… a fancy, professional reputation,” and gestures. It’s true that the office wasn’t *exactly* what Shen Yuan, or probably anyone else, would expect from a therapist’s office or any medical professional’s. And while the snakes had been a nice bonus, he supposes not many people would find that mess of a place cozy.

“Oh, I met him at one of the charity galas a couple of years ago,” Yue Qi hums, with that gentle smile. Even if his entire body language seems relaxed, Shen Yuan notices a tiny bit of nervousness from the way his fingers gently tap the table. “I didn’t keep track of him, but he, his nephew, and his spouse have been attending those galas ever since. They’re really good benefactors, and Dr. Jun mentioned being a therapist at a dinner party. When Xiao Jiu told me you’d agreed to therapy, I thought he might be… suitable for you.”

Shen Yuan hums absently. Well, he supposes he expected it; a wealthy, eccentric therapist who goes to charity galas—where else could he have come to the attention of Jiu-ge and Yue-ge? It's not as if either of them had social lives outside of work, or a large circle of friends with careers that weren't working for them.

“I guess so.” Shen Yuan slurps another mouthful of noodles. It’s the closest he’ll get to proving Jiu-ge right, he supposes, after all. Dr. Jun isn’t a bad therapist. Shen Yuan just still

has no idea why it’s so absolutely necessary for him to go to therapy and why everyone seems so relieved that he’s doing it.

His life is *completely normal*! He does things, plays with Chengle, takes care of Chengle… and takes Chengle for walks. Isn't that absolutely *normal*? Yes, he doesn't have a formal job, and what's wrong with that! And even when he spent all day in bed—or on the floor mat, or on the sofa—the truth is, *none of it* was depression. He was just… tired. Sometimes even too tired to concentrate and read.

Shen Jiu lets out an exhausted sigh, as if for some mysterious reason, he can read Shen Yuan's thoughts. Shen Yuan makes it a point to roll his eyes at him. Yeah, okay, he's doing this mostly to forgive his brother for being stupid and to please everyone else. There's nothing about him that needs to be analyzed under a bloody magnifying glass. He doesn't need the therapy. He'll only last a few more sessions until Dr. Jun resigns himself to the fact that there's nothing wrong with Shen Yuan and lets him go. And he can rub it right in Jiu-ge's face!

There's nothing wrong with him. He's not depressed or anything. Shen Yuan will prove it to him.

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Luo Binghe doesn't return until mid-afternoon the next day. Shen Yuan is sprawled on the sofa, trying to read the damn PIDW what if that caught his attention and getting frustrated by the fact that no matter how hard he tries, he's been reading the same paragraph without understanding or processing a single word for the past five minutes. Chengle is surrounded by his tigers, having collected all his Legos in a giant plastic box and trying to build a grand palace that will be protected by giant tigers, when they can both feel the pressure in the air before the portal even opens.

Luo Binghe appears from behind the portal a moment later. Darkness tears through space, opening around him in dark, visceral lines that rend reality. Shen Yuan immediately feels dizzy, but when Luo Binghe bursts through in his robes, boots in the hand that isn't holding Xin Mo, Shen Yuan can only feel a bit of foolish amusement about it.

“Yuan-ge,” Luo Binghe greets, a look of relief on his face. Then he looks over to where Chengle has climbed onto the sofa, glaring at Luo Binghe with a sour face. “Chengle.”

“Mnhp,” the boy makes a dismissive gesture. The portal clicks shut awkwardly behind Luo Binghe, who seems to make a strange seal with his hand that swallows Xin Mo. As soon as Xin Mo stops showing himself, it’s clear that the air in the apartment feels much lighter. “Father Emperor took *a long time* to return.”

Luo Binghe smiles. Shen Yuan supposes that's the closest Chengle will come to saying he missed him, or something like that.

“This Lord must have taken on more than he had planned in the first place,” he says, bowing his head in a small manner. Shen Yuan finds himself laughing a little, unable to understand

where the damn burst of joy is coming from. “This one has brought more gifts for Prince Chengle, for his delay.”

That, of course, seems to totally catch Chengle's interest. What kid refuses gifts, after all?

Luo Binghe only has time to leave his boots at the entrance. Chengle doesn't even let him change as he pushes his Legos off the coffee table, demanding his gifts. Shen Yuan watches, hardly daring to interrupt, as Luo Binghe unwraps box after box of gifts from his sleeves. There's a rather large serving of milk candies, rock candy clearly sent by Sha Hualing. In the middle of the things he gives Chengle, Luo Binghe manages to sneak in a wooden box with more herbs and things sent by Mu Qingfang and letters for Shen Yuan, which Shen Yuan acknowledges with a smile, without interrupting.

Luo Chengle, like any little boy, seems to get happier the more presents he receives. Inside is a bouncing ball that jingles, and no matter where he throws it, like a boomerang, it always comes back to Chengle. What seems to make him squeal the most are a bunch of little wooden animals, carved with a level of detail and care that even Shen Yuan can appreciate the realism.

“They’re some of the best craftsmen in the Demon Realm,” Luo Binghe explains. Not only are there animals Chengle has shown that are native to the world he now lives in, but a host of creatures Shen Yuan watches, fascinated. How is it that beasts as powerful and dangerous as a Strangler-Horned Python or a Scaly Swamp Lion can look SO adorable in the form of tiny wooden creatures? “Then Chengle can make a zoo for all of them.”

“They’re wonderful,” Shen Yuan says, holding a tiny carving of a Black Moon Rhinoceros-Python in his hands. “Oh my… It’s…”

Then, almost making him scream, the little Black Moon Rhinoceros-Python moves in his hands, opening its mouth and its tongue, fierce as a snake, flicking in the air.

“They’re moving!!” squeals Chengle, who seems to have discovered the same thing with a Northern Chameleon Panther. “Baba Yuan, look, look!”

“They respond to hand heat,” Luo Binghe explains, with a bright, proud smile. “As long as they are touched, they will respond with movements that emulate their species. If left untouched for a long time, they will become still like wooden toys again. It didn’t take this Lord long to develop the spell.”

Shen Yuan observes in great detail. Yes, there, among the carvings, is clearly the configuration of a talisman, delicately crafted into the wood. Shen Yuan is absolutely fascinated, laughing in disbelief as the Black Moon Rhino-Python brushes its wooden tongue against his fingers, probably seeking to be lethal, something a small, four-inch-tall figurine with polished, blunt edges couldn't possibly be.

“Are they to Prince Chengle’s liking?” Luo Binghe asks, his expression expectant. Chengle seems to remind himself that it’s his father he’s speaking to, because he forces the joy out of his face into a thoughtful expression.

“Mmm… *maybe*,” the boy says, his chin raised, all the pride of a prince making Shen Yuan smile. “This Prince could *almost be* forgiving Father Emperor for leaving. For *so* long. Baba Yuan was very, very sad, and Baba Yuan must never be sad!”

“Chengle!” Shen Yuan sits up, feeling the heat hit his face. His sweet boy has the cutest expression, and Shen Yuan *can't* be mad at him even if it’s for raising false eyebrows like that, but still…!

“Was Yuan-ge sad without this Lord’s presence?” Luo Binghe asks, looking directly at him. Shen Yuan’s tongue feels heavy in his mouth, so he just snorts, looking away.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he complains, reaching out to pinch Chengle’s cheek. “And you! What are you talking about? Me, sad?”

“Yes, very sad!” Chengle has a wide, playful smile on his face. “But Chengle is here! And Chengle will *always make Baba Yuan happy*,” he says, looking at Luo Binghe with a clearly dangerous, absolutely defiant smile. “Something Father Emperor *doesn't know how to do.*”

Shen Yuan pinches the bridge of his nose. Oh God, seriously, these two…

“Well, then…” Luo Binghe’s gaze flicked between Shen Yuan and Chengle, who still had that proud, clearly provocative expression, looking to win. It was the same expression that Chengle had when he kept calling Shen Jiu ‘Jiu-ge’. “Chengle must teach this Lord how to make Yuan-ge happy.”

Chengle seems to be thinking about it seriously, because after a deep, dramatic, and resigned sigh, he says: “All right. But Baba Yuan will be the happiest, or *you'll see*.”

“You two,” Shen Yuan grabs his softest, most comfortable pillow and gently hits Chengle’s head with it. The boy cackles, wriggling away from the second blow. “What kind of things is my boy saying? And threatening like that! What manners have I taught you? Come back here!”

The boy keeps laughing, slipping away. Luo Binghe catches him as he passes by, and instead of flinching and staying silent, Chengle keeps wanting to wriggle out of his grasp.

“No, no! Father Emperor must be on my side! Not trap me!” the boy squeals. Luo Binghe raises an eyebrow at Shen Yuan, a question mark written all over his face. Shen Yuan shakes his head.

“But, if Yuan-ge finds happiness in giving Chengle his due punishment for threatening this Lord…” Luo Binghe hums, and Chengle squirms even more in his arms.

“*Nooo*!” he squeals, and bursts into laughter again when Shen Yuan slaps the pillow, now on his stomach. “No, no, no! Baba Yuan! It’s not fair!”

Chengle doesn't seem genuinely worried, sad, or sulking. In fact, he seems quite amused in Luo Binghe's hands, who takes the opportunity to tickle him profusely, causing the boy to writhe and squeal with laughter. Shen Yuan "accidentally" leaves his pillow in the boy's

hands, and finds himself being ferociously attacked by the softest of his pillows, having to use a stuffed tiger as a shield and another of his pillows to return the attack.

Almost fifteen minutes later, Shen Yuan is having a hard time breathing from thrashing around, but Chengle seems in a better mood than ever, writhing around on the plush carpet, his face flushed from laughing so hard and his forehead shiny with sweat from running around. Shen Yuan has to give himself a point because neither of them knocked over or broke anything in such a rough game.

Only when Chengle has calmed down his laughter a little does Luo Binghe take out the last of his gifts. As soon as he sees the characters and shapes on the talisman paper, Shen Yuan covers his face with his hands.

“Oh, no, no,” it begins, more like a strangled murmur that dies down as Chengle squeaks in astonishment, followed by the sound of a yawn. Shen Yuan peers through his fingers, watching as the large Dawang Tiger now has one of the talismans on its back, and stretches like a real tiger, stretching out of its plush form to leap up next to Chengle, with all the motions of a lazy fat cat as it begins head-butting him, demanding petting from him.

“These were the initial talismans,” Luo Binghe explains. Shen Yuan looks at the talisman paper; touching it makes his skin prickle a little, as if he were touching something with a vibrant spark beneath his fingers. The strokes are identical on each one, repeated with firm and careful dedication. “This Lord has been working on something… similar to this, intending to awaken the Statues of the Ancient Sacred Mausoleum in search of secrets and answers.”

“That sounds *interesting*,” Shen Yuan says, because it definitely is. “And Binghe decided to test it with stuffed tigers and wooden animals earlier?”

Luo Binghe places another talisman on the back of another tiger. It's much smaller, the shape of a tiger cub that seems to slowly come to life, blinking and shaking its ruffled fur, hopping much more clumsily than the Dawang Tiger, and nestling between where that tiger seeks petting and Chengle, demanding petting as well. Shen Yuan thinks he should be a little afraid: in no world should it be pleasant to have stuffed animals wandering about with a will of their own. Yet the way Chengle seems happy among them is something that washes over him like a dam breaking.

When Shen Yuan looks at Luo Binghe's face, it's no longer a surprise to find him smiling. It's a warm, light, subtle smile; the curve of his mouth barely curves. It doesn't seem like a smile that Luo Binghe is even aware is there, as he watches his happy son, as if he isn't even fully aware of how happy something like that can make him.

“No,” Luo Binghe finally replies. “This Lord has decided what would be most important to use them for.”

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After dinner, Luo Chengle quickly fell asleep. He hadn't had a nap that afternoon after so much roughhousing, and it wasn't even nine o'clock when the boy was already snoring,

wrapped in stuffed tigers that were now hugging him back, purring and covering him all over. Shen Yuan would have to remember to take down all those talismans and put them away when his family came over.

Unlike Chengle, Shen Yuan had slept a little lazily after lunch while Chengle watched Lilo & Stitch *again*. His back was a little sore from having been leaning against the sofa, but it's nothing the heated blanket draped over his back couldn't relieve.

With nothing much to do, he lets Luo Binghe distract himself in the kitchen while he checks the apartments directly on an old tablet he rarely uses except for playing games or watch videos, just because of the larger screen size to appreciate everything more closely. He hasn't made a big decision yet: he's contacted a couple of numbers and scheduled a few appointments for after the new year. They aren't too far away, so when Airplane moves into this one, he's sure it won't be far for him to get there if he needs to, or even for Shen Yuan to drop by to say hello and make sure he's not just eating damn cheap instant ramen from the supermarket.

God, Shen Yuan is going to mutate into his damn brother. He laughs a little at the silly irony as he continues checking and comparing. The apartments he's seen so far are one thing in the photos: admittedly, furnished isn't something he'd choose, but none of them will have more than basic furnishings when he sees them, and he *needs* to see them. Especially for ridiculous things like the floor not being so slippery, the distance between the bedroom and the bathroom not being ridiculously large, there being comfortable spaces for two or more people to pass in the same direction...

It's frustrating and exhausting having to find a place that suits everything he needs. There can't be steps anywhere, let alone small bathrooms with limited space. Shen Yuan is almost certain he'll have a headache before he finds a suitable place. Well, at least the ones he's scheduled to visit *look* like a good option. He'll just have to see what they're like in person and maybe then look into what's available in the neighborhood and surrounding areas, so as not to make any plans or get his hopes up in advance.

“Is Yuan-ge cold?” Luo Binghe asks, and Shen Yuan jumps. He hadn’t heard him approaching. “Does Yuan-ge want something? Water, tea…?”

Luo Binghe has changed out of his robes. He's wearing a ridiculous pair of pajamas with a bunch of colorful flowers on them that Shen Yuan had thought was hilarious to buy him, and damn, he actually looks good in them. Why do even things that should look bad on him make him look like a runway model? It would be the classic example of buying something ugly just because it looks good on the model, only to discover that yes, it was ugly clothes, it was just a... very good model.

“I’m fine,” Shen Yuan replies with a light smile, and when Luo Binghe points to the heated blanket on his shoulders, Shen Yuan grimaces. “Ah, it’s… it’s not cold. My back just hurts a little. It’s nothing.”

“Can this Lord help?”

Shen Yuan shrugs, shifting a little so Luo Binghe can sit behind him. He slides the blanket a little, allowing Luo Binghe access to his back. He's still staring at the apartment on his tablet, wondering how well the sound insulation from the streets would be on the third floor instead of higher, when Luo Binghe's touch on his shoulders makes his skin crawl.

Shen Yuan expects Luo Binghe's usual warmth. All it does lately is help undo the pain, easing it rather than nullifying it; even Shen Yuan has a theory that he's questioned Mu Qingfang on how to do it properly. That's what Shen Yuan expects, this time, only to feel a chill when Luo Binghe presses his fingers a little firmer against the tense muscles.

“Oh,” he gasps, as the pain flares only to fade. It’s a painful sensation that shouldn’t be so pleasurable. “*Oh.*”

Luo Binghe is massaging his back with skillful hands. They seem to find the exact spot where the tension lies, digging his fingers and knuckles in with firm but not arduous force, and Shen Yuan almost feels himself melting beneath the firm, steady motion that loosens the tension with both pain and relief.

A part of him twists like bile. Of course it's so *obvious* that Luo Binghe gives amazing massages, isn't that just another seduction technique from the harem master? Of course he—

But Luo Binghe pushes his thumb against the sore side just below his shoulder blade, and Shen Yuan has to abruptly cover his mouth with his hand to keep the sound of relief from escaping.

“Yuan-ge?” Luo Binghe’s voice is almost on his ear, his breath tickling his neck. His hands remain in a firm touch, unmoving, his thumb digging firmly into that sore spot, causing both pain and relief that Shen Yuan feels his eyes almost wet. It’s *too* good. “Is it too painful?”

Shen Yuan feels his entire neck burning. His face feels almost feverish. At the same time, he's almost indignant. Really?! Luo Binghe, if something is too painful, you shouldn't keep touching it!

But Luo Binghe doesn't loosen his hand. Shen Yuan shakes his head, swallowing, taking a deep breath, and forcing his voice not to tremble as he says, "No, not too much..."

“Mn,” Luo Binghe hums, almost against his neck. His breath is hot and sends an almost electric shiver down Shen Yuan’s spine. “Is it *good*, then?”

“You— *oh!”* Shen Yuan has to bite his lip hard, covering his mouth with his hand again as Luo Binghe’s fingers press a little harder, sliding over the taut line of muscle almost to his waist. His thumbs are devastatingly firm and powerful, while his knuckles follow the motion, bringing almost immediate relief. “It’s… it’s, it’s.”

Luo Binghe laughs. His laugh sends more shivers down Shen Yuan's spine. Shen Yuan feels like he might be hallucinating, because it's as if he can feel the brush of Luo Binghe's lips against his neck. He goes to turn around, try and see what the hell, when the pressure of Luo Binghe's hands pushes back into the taut knots in his back, making him melt. His eyes feel tearful, his face hot, and he's biting his lip hard, keeping every relieved sound inside his

mouth. It's downright difficult when his throat feels like it has a damn life of its own, and all it manages to do is make Luo Binghe try harder to tear sounds from him.

The relief is *absolute*. It hits him better than any other massage he's ever received; it's as if, with each massage, each stroke over the tense muscles, Luo Binghe is slowly injecting his qi, making him delirious. His hands slide down his neck, his shoulders, pressing against muscles Shen Yuan wasn't even aware of how tense they were. He's almost wrapping his body around him, and Shen Yuan realizes he's abandoned the tablet, only covering his mouth with one hand when Luo Binghe wraps his wrist in a delicate but firm grip. The massaging strokes are there too, pressing against the stiff tendons in his wrist, sliding across his palm, making his fingers almost tremble.

It's a strange, unfamiliar relief. Luo Binghe is a warmth that is in every direction, a constant chill, hot breathing on his neck. Shen Yuan feels like he's literally trembling, struck by the utterly devastating visage of the Protagonist as he turns slightly over his shoulder, staring down at Luo Binghe. His pupils are almost indecipherable from the black of his irises, a wide thing like a black lake Shen Yuan suddenly finds himself submerged in. Long eyelashes surround his intense gaze, a pink blush high on his cheekbones, lips glistening as Luo Binghe runs his tongue across them.

Shen Yuan feels his breath hitch. As if fiercely whipped by his own ridiculous humiliation, he is aware of how abruptly his heart is beating, of the heat of his face, the tears clinging to his eyelashes. He is aware of Luo Binghe's hand flat on his back, the way the warmth of his body envelops him, the way his hand entangles around his wrist with impossible delicacy.

"*Binghe*" is all he can say, because really, *what* is he going to say? *Thank you very much for the massage, are you all right now? Are you experiencing qi deviation or what?*

Luo Binghe looks as if Shen Yuan has struck him. He closes his eyes, his breathing stopping for a moment.

“Binghe?” Shen Yuan asks, now a little worried. He’s okay, right? He was just passing some qi through his back; it couldn’t possibly be that he was giving him a *real qi deviation* just because of that, right? He’s *Luo Binghe,* he’s definitely stronger than that to…

“*I need*...” Luo Binghe says, his voice so hoarse that Shen Yuan feels it as a personal attack. “…Yuan-ge, I…”

"*Yes*?"

Luo Binghe opens his eyes. He looks at him, and Shen Yuan feels as if he's boiling under his very skin. *What the hell.* Luo Binghe has no fucking right to have such a lethal face card! A veil, they should have gotten him that too! His harem would be half as big if it weren't for that devastatingly beautiful face and-…!

“Excuse me. This one… I forgot something in the kitchen,” and as soon as he says that, Luo Binghe scurries off at such a speed, slamming the kitchen door shut behind him, that Shen Yuan can abruptly feel the chill where Luo Binghe’s hands are no longer touching him. He

snorts, wrapping the heated blanket around himself. Oh, really! He shifts in his seat, embarrassed.

Well, it’s not Shen Yuan’s fault! Luo Binghe had offered to help with that massage! If he then simply got fed up with Shen Yuan not being a lovable Meimei, it’s not Shen Yuan’s fault at all, really!

He wraps himself in the blanket, embarrassedly covering his face with the pillow. He can feel the way his back muscles have relaxed, still a shadow of shivers on his spine and… And only then, shifting in his seat to settle into a more comfortable position, can he feel exactly why the position is now so uncomfortable… *God!* What the *hell*?! No, it's *not* his fault, it's not his fault! His body has *the right* to react to… situations! It doesn't matter if it was a man's hands on his back, it was something really nice and pleasurable and a relief and…!

…Although Shen Yuan had received massages before and hadn't… *reacted*… that way.

He lets out a weak, frustrated sound against the pillow, not even loud enough to scream. What the hell. *What the hell was that?* He hugs his knees to his chest, forcing himself not to cover his head with the damn blanket, forcing himself to take a deep breath and calm down.

Okay. He’s sure a cold shower *won't* do his back or muscles *or health* any good, but maybe if it's fast enough it will make good for his… circulation. Yes. It will help his circulation a lot. That's it. No more than that.

Chapter End Notes

Park Mom: Ahaha, I finally got this cute rich guy's number-
Park Mom, one call later: Why are all the cute guys married or gay?

Me, as the author: Well, at the end of this chapter, Shen Yuan will be looking at apartments and showing Binghe his options. Binghe will ask why there's a third room, and Shen Yuan will explain that it's for Binghe, so he'll have his own space in his house. It'll be a cute, tender scene where Shen Yuan reaffirms that there's a home for Binghe wherever Shen Yuan is :)
Binghe, stopping my hands with a sword at my neck: Actually, I have a BETTER idea

I SWEAR I DIDN'T PLAN ON ENDING THE CHAPTER LIKE THIS. IT WAS ALL BINGHE'S FAULT. XIN MO'S KEWKNEWKRN I DON'T KNOW, I DON'T KNOW WHO TO BLAME, I SWEAR I DIDN'T PLAN THIS. ANYWAY. I'M SORRY, BINGGE. I KNOW ALL YOUR BLOOD WENT SOUTH WHEN YOU SAW SY'S FLUSHED FACE WITH TEARY EYES AND BITTEN LIPS. I'M SO SORRY AND I'M NOT SORRY AT ALL YOU MADE ME

Hey, where's Airplane? *says in the voice of Phineas Flynn*
SY, the "straight" guy, noticing every single physical detail of men he finds handsome, not even describing what color hair or hairstyle, what her face looks like, some physical

feature of her body that Park Mom has, or even noticing more than her clothes, shoes, makeup, or accessories. Seriously, dude, please, PLEASE-

Ah, Yue Qi, you're really not suspicious at all, saying you met Dr. Jun at a gala and looking all nervous about it. Hmm, what happened there? :P Ah, I'm so sorry Jiu-ge, no Uncle Jiu for you for now :B

Bingge deciding to be a father before being a Lord and dropping some PIDW-plot background like crumbs. I love him so much, he's trying, even if trying to be a good father might involve making a baby for his Yuan-ge, or letting SY make one for him, honestly anything could work for LBH as long as it /happens/. Which in fact can't happen because he doesn't have his son's permission yet and he gave his word (sadly)

HEHEHE I ENJOYED WRITING THIS CHAPTER TOO MUCH. MOM PARK IS A FUNNY EXTRA TO DEAL WITH, POOR WOMAN, SHE'LL ONE DAY GET A RICH HUSBAND, BUT THAT HUSBAND WON'T BE ONE OF THE SHENS. ONE IS MARRIED, ONE IS IN THE PROCESS OF BEING COURTED, AND ONE IS TOO AUTISTIC TO NOTICE IF SOMEONE TRIES TO COURT HIM. Maybe Meimei would be interested, but she'd be a good aunt and not a very good mother, so sorry Park Mom, no Shen for you :P
THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING!!! WOW, I HOPE YOU LIKED THE CHAPTER A LOT!!! Guys, I seriously enjoy writing this and sharing it all with you. You all are my best friends and I thank you SO MUCH. I'm in shock at all the immense love I get from you all, you make my day bright and everything feels so beautiful
OH WELL, YOU KNOW!!! KUDO-COMMENT-INTERACTION, I APPRECIATE EVERYTHING, I LOVE YOU ALL SO MUCH!! SEE YOU TOMORROW??? PROBABLY!!!!
SEE YOU SOON!!! HUGS!!!!

Chapter 24: First catastrophe

Chapter Notes

> THIS CHAPTER ALMOST DIDN'T GET MADE BECAUSE I MADE THE STUPID DECISION TO well you'll see
> Last night I had insomnia. I wrote a completely different chapter. I woke up at 4 p.m., read it, and discarded half of it because it wasn't entirely satisfactory. That means I wrote this chapter twice :'D
>
> Chapter warnings: TOO MUCH INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA. Proceed with caution. Also, internalized ableism and self-stigma.
> *Edit: Also, my sister says there's a lot of /GENDER/ in parts of this chapter. I can't fully explain why but if she says so, I guess she's right, so I'm adding the warning just in case :P
>
> Enjoy the chapter :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I think,” Airplane says, looking like an absolute moron as he nibbles at the side of his enormous chocolate chip cookie, “that you’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

They're outside. It's a coffee shop literally at the end of the street, a cozy little place with a reading area isolated from the sounds of the outside world. Shen Yuan used to go there when the weather was nice or he'd grown bored enough of its walls, fascinated by the sheer level of isolation from the outside world even though thick glass doors made the library area visible from the tables. Now, Chengle sits there, reading a Cardcaptor Sakura manga volume with wide, alert eyes. He seems much more relaxed than ever outside, and Shen Yuan supposes it *must* be a joy for a child with such highly developed senses to find himself without so many environmental interruptions, especially in such a noisy city.

“He *disappeared*,” Shen Yuan says, finally, not for the first time. “Will you *please* take this seriously?” he hisses, absolutely frustrated.

The worst part about this whole situation isn't being *frustrated*, Shen Yuan thinks. The worst part is not understanding *why.* Yes, Luo Binghe was leaving and coming back, there was nothing wrong with it. It was just… well. Shen Yuan didn't expect to wake up and find Luo Binghe *gone*.

He hadn't expected to wake up to an empty kitchen, an empty sofa, his horribly washed pajamas (by hand!! Shen Yuan wasn't even sure he had laundry soap for hand washing!!) and left at the back of the dryer, as if he wanted Shen Yuan to blend them in with the clothes he'd be drying later in his regular wash. His boots weren't there by the door, and until he found the

note after a long while next to the floor lamp in the entryway, the absence of his boots was the only sign that Luo Binghe had *really* left.

Obviously, it wasn't like he could just tell Jiu-ge about it and complain, and really, even if Airplane understood that, well, it wasn't entirely *normal* for Luo Binghe to leave without warning, he understood that he'd definitely had some kind of freak emergency. Who would know more about what kind of disasters would occur in PIDW that required Luo Binghe to be there personally to resolve them than the author himself?

Besides, Shen Yuan had expected… well. *He hadn't expected anything*. He'd snuck into a cold shower until his circulation was… normal. Yes. *Normal*. He'd said a quick goodnight to Luo Binghe before going to bed, curling up, and staring at the ceiling, his heart still hammering in his throat, until maybe 1:00 a.m., when one of the talisman-animated tigers took pity on him, leaping up and kneading his chest like a pampered cat with absolutely no weight and no claws to sharpen, with a low purr that at another time would have driven Shen Yuan mad with questions about how something stuffed with plush could make those sounds, or any sound at all—but which, at that moment, was the only thing that got him to sleep.

And then he woke up, and Luo Binghe wasn't there. Who knows what time in the morning he'd left, quietly slipping away into the darkness.

Shen Yuan, for some ridiculous reason, was afraid that he wouldn't come back. It was such a heartbreaking, horrible despair that he could feel it even in his bones.

Which is stupid! Chengle is there! He'd left things in the apartment! Robes and clothes and heavy belts and jewels that decorate his cloaks and all those things a person usually takes if they're planning on leaving forever! It's obvious Luo Binghe would come back. Not that *he'd need* any of that if he really wanted to leave and leave everything behind, but…

But… But Shen Yuan couldn't muster any idea why he'd been so desperate and distressed all day. Luo Binghe would come back. *He must come back.*

Ridiculous. He's being extremely ridiculous. But really, he really needed to get out of that apartment before he kept staring at every wall looking for Luo Binghe as if he'd just show up there because Shen Yuan was waiting for him. Bah! As if on Luo Binghe's priority scale, what Shen Yuan expected or thought or nothing was even remotely important! Nothing, zero!

He's just his son's current adoptive father, whom his son has grown quite attached to! So what? Luo Binghe has a bunch of other children who are clearly missing a present father figure in their lives. Neither Chengle nor Shen Yuan are meant to be… anything special. To him. In his life. They're just… another thing. Something that's there, and Luo Binghe has to take care of it, like the bunch of reckless decisions the Oh Great and Mighty Demon Emperor has made that have led him to wherever the hell he is now.

"You're being dramatic," Airplane insists, fiddling with the paper napkin in his hand. "Seriously, an absolute, huge drama queen. I didn't know you like that, Cucumber-bro."

"Fuck you," Shen Yuan mumbles. He rubs his hand over his face, exhausted. His fingers are too cold. It's a day with unstable weather, with a strong, freezing blizzard and overcast skies

with an impending winter storm, and Shen Yuan *wasn't going* to take a car just to get to the coffee shop just down the street. Getting there had been difficult even with the little bit of walking, let alone the exposure. Damn it, *he'd take* Luo Binghe's damn blood parasites if he'd just promise to keep him from catching a cold so Jiu-ge wouldn't be screaming in his ear. "Just, I mean… Airplane, *he's gone."*

"Well, yeah, he has to go back to his palace and all that every now and then, doesn't he?" Airplane sips loudly from his cup of milky tea and shrugs off even Shen Yuan's harshest glare. "Why does it bother you so much, huh? You sound like my neighbor when she slept with her boyfriend and then he wouldn't return her calls. The whole building got wind of that gossip, for God's sake, the walls are paper thin and…"

Airplane suddenly opens his eyes so wide they seem as if they might pop out of his head. At the same time, he abruptly chokes on his milk tea, and Shen Yuan has to stand up and slap his back.

"*You actually slept with Luo Binghe?"* Airplane hisses, his face red from choking. Shen Yuan takes advantage of the fact that he's standing and slaps him on the head.

"Absolutely *not,*" Shen Yuan growls, returning to his seat. "What's wrong with you, why are you always asking that? I have two big tits that I haven't noticed, do I look like a woman to you?"

"It wouldn't be *weird,*" Airplane complains, rubbing where Shen Yuan had slap him on the head. Bah. Like it's actually painful. If Shen Yuan wanted Airplane to be in pain, he'd probably be crying right now. Although, to be honest, it doesn't seem like it takes much to make Airplane cry. "Well, Luo Binghe is like… all possessive and weird around you, whether you have tits or not, and I mean, it's not like you need them judging by the way he looks at you. I wouldn't be surprised."

"*He is,* and more importantly, *I am* straight," Shen Yuan growls. Airplane rolls his eyes, clicking his tongue. "That's relevant!"

"Whatever you say," Airplane waves his hand absentmindedly, dismissing the matter's utter importance. "Well then, stop acting like a girlfriend who was deflowered and then dumped. Luo Binghe left, yes, hasn't he been gone all last week? Isn't he wandering around all the time? Something urgent must have come up, it's normal. Why is this time so important to you, huh?"

Shen Yuan opens his mouth to complain. Then he closes it. He actually has no idea what the difference is. If he knew—fuck, if he even had a damn clue!—it would probably be easier. He just wouldn't freak out about *not knowing* where he's supposed to have gone, or *why.*

He feels guilty in a way he can't explain and isn't even sure he's in his right mind to address it.

"He just *left,*" he mumbles, resting his face in his hand. He shouldn't be so… upset or indignant. He shouldn't. But just, well. If he knew, he wouldn't be half as frustrated, in fact! It's just that Luo Binghe had been away so much. Shen Yuan had grown accustomed to the

ridiculously easy life that came with having Luo Binghe cook, sweep, help fold laundry, and share the time to look after Chengle. God, *it was* so much easier to be able to look after Chengle without exhausting himself to the point of suffering when someone else could play with him, watch over him, keep him company…

It was just so much easier to be living with Luo Binghe around.

He doesn't understand why he feels so... exhausted and humiliated. Luo Binghe, thank God!!, hadn't even seen the... absolutely normal physiological reaction of his body. Something normal! Human! Contact! Shen Yuan had been, well, in contact only with a child and his own family! It was absolutely *normal* if his body simply reacted to a little touch that involved relief, brain chemicals, everything... was...

It shouldn't be so confusing.

"And he's coming back," and Airplane continues sipping his milk tea, as if Shen Yuan's massive catastrophe doesn't matter one bit to him. Which is probably true. Shen Yuan is aware he's being a bit melodramatic, but hey. He'd made *plans* that included Luo Binghe. He wanted to take Chengle to Meland! He'd definitely need a responsible, active father who could accompany him to half of those games! "Seriously, Cucumber-bro. What's making such a big deal about?"

"*I don't know,*" Shen Yuan hisses, and honestly, what would he give to know. His head is in absolute chaos. He wants to see Luo Binghe and demand that he explain himself. He wants to see Luo Binghe and ask him if everything is okay. He wants to see Luo Binghe and just know that he didn't do something horrible and shameful and that now Luo Binghe hates him forever for…

For?

Shen Yuan buries his face in his hands. He wants to go back to his apartment, bury his face in the pillow, and *scream.* But he also wants to stay far away from the apartment, far enough away so he doesn't see that Luo Binghe left without a word, right after he returned, right after they had chatted together that afternoon as if he were willing to stay after leaving all those days.

With his face in his hands, Shen Yuan says, "God, I'm so sick of myself."

"Uh," and Airplane makes an uncomfortable sound. "No, we're not going that way. Just… Bro," and Shen Yuan takes a hand away from his face, looking at Airplane with only one eye slightly blurry from rubbing it. "Look, you just… missed him, huh, and now you thought he was going to stay, and instead of being a normal person and just getting angry, you're doing a jilted-girlfriend melodrama. Manage your emotions better. Breathe. Uh. He'll come back, and then you can complain to him and set some limits or something. I don't know, normal relationships, bro, you see, everything will be okay."

"Wow, that helps *a lot,"* Shen Yuan complains. Still, he forces himself to take a deep breath. He takes such deep breaths that it hurts on his sides, and he feels absolutely ridiculous that

after five deep breaths, he's *actually* starting to feel clearer-headed. What the *hell*. "Just… I don't know, Airplane."

"Oh, yeah, yeah," and Airplane pats Shen Yuan's seemingly reassuring hand on the table. That it's the same hand Shen Yuan had once used to slap him a moment ago is just a little ironic. "Look, uh. When he gets back, you can demand that he, I don't know, tell you before he goes anywhere? That you're worried about him or something?" and when Shen Yuan gives him one of his best glares, Airplane throws up both hands, his expression trying to be innocent. "Oh, I don't know! Chengle! Tell him you don't want him to, I don't know, grow up wondering whether his father is going to be there when he needs him, that you don't want him to see a door waiting for him to walk into and never show up… " and Airplane is quiet for a moment, wincing. "Ouch, said that hurts."

"I'm sorry," Shen Yuan sighs, rubbing his eyes again. He knows the subject of parents and family isn't easy for Airplane, and the last thing he wants to do is poke at the open wound. "I just… I needed to get away from there for a while."

"Well, you always have your Airplane-juju to keep you and my cute little grandson company," Airplane says, with a grimace that's more of a grimace than a smile. "Except when you make me talk about serious things. Please, bro. Let's not talk about the elephant in the room: your depression and dependency issues, but don't make me bring up my abandonment and daddy issues either. There won't be any fun conversations about any of that."

"You with that too?" Shen Yuan complains, snorting. Despite everything, his mouth curls into a smile. It's ridiculous. "I'm not depressed, and I don't have any dependency issues. Jiu-ge cut out almost all of my medications—I don't even know what dosage I'm on—and I'm *fine.*"

"Yeah, right, with a good dose of xianxia weed from our favorite cure-all dealer," Airplane stammers, and Shen Yuan throws a crumpled napkin at him, hitting him square in the forehead. "Hey! Do you think their papapa cure-all might *work* on you, or…?"

"For *God's sake*," Shen Yuan assesses how badly he wants his last sip of tea, and whether it's cold enough to throw in Shang Qinghua's face. The hack author slurps loudly from his own cup, and Shen Yuan sighs in resignation. "Shut your mouth."

"Let me know if it works," Airplane says, and Shen Yuan throws the spoon straight at his head.

Luo Chengle joins them a little later, when the waitress brings Shen Yuan's order for the child: a delicious slice of red velvet with his hot chocolate. Shen Yuan has already decided to buy him his first volumes of his own manga collection, so the decision isn't difficult when the boy seems extremely excited about Cardcaptor Sakura. It's a little easier to distract himself from his mental chaos when the boy happily eats his piece of cake, his little feet floating off the floor in his seat, while telling his Uncle Ai-plein about the new story he's working on.

"Yes!" says Chengle, delighted when Airplane guesses one of the points that would happen in his plot. "So, the prince has this magic necklace! And all the tigers listen to him! And if he

tells the tigers, attack that evil man! The tigers go and attack him. And they throw him away. Very far away!"

Shen Yuan is staring at Chengle with such tenderness, his chest bursting with joy and love at every single thing the adorable boy does, that when his phone starts vibrating it takes him a long moment to actually notice. When he takes it out of his pocket, curious as to why Jiu-ge is calling him now – to be honest, Jiu-ge always seemed to prefer calling and being able to hear people's tones of voices over texting – he freezes, staring at the incoming call with a puzzled expression.

Luo Binghe.

Airplane cranes his head, staring at the screen. Shen Yuan ignores his triumphant smile as best he can and answers the call.

"Hello?" he murmurs, somewhat confused. He'd taught Luo Binghe how to use his phone, of course, but he'd never seemed to *actually* want to use it more than to take a few pictures. Still, he got frustrated like his mother had when she got her first smartphone, tapping the buttons on the screen too hard, almost believing the ads on the side of the pages were speaking directly to her.

"Yuan-ge?" Shen Yuan hears Luo Binghe's voice on the line, strangely far away. He has no idea how he's holding the phone. "Are you… where are both of you?"

Shen Yuan opens his mouth, then closes it. He feels a strange, absolute indignation boiling in his chest. Well, of course! He disappears as if nothing happened, just saying it's urgent, that he'll be back, and then just…! And he asks where *Shen Yuan is* and…

Shen Yuan pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to control his temper. He takes a deep breath.

"Yuan-ge?" Luo Binghe insists, his voice more alarmed.

"We're fine," Shen Yuan replies. Chengle has stopped talking, his curious little eyes darting between Shen Yuan and the phone. Shen Yuan tries hard to give the boy a smile that, he tries, is encouraging enough. "We're having dessert with Chengle and Airplane. Not far from home."

"Yes, this Lord…" Luo Binghe seems to be thinking about something besides the call, because a sharp sound is heard and then "…this one came home and no one was there. This one thought… Yuan-ge was in pain last night."

Shen Yuan feels all his fury subside as if a bucket of ice water had been thrown on the fire.

"Oh," he says, shaking his head. "No, I'm not at the hospital. I'm sorry, I must have left a note or something." And it's so absurd how something so, *so* tiny seems to make Shen Yuan able to breathe deeply again. Luo Binghe had arrived, seen an empty apartment, and thought Shen Yuan was in the hospital. He'd struggled with a phone he barely knew how to use to communicate, *worried.* Shen Yuan feels humiliated in a way he can't even describe. "We're

at a coffee shop at the end of the street, off to the right, right around a corner. You can come in if you want."

Chengle snorts, sulking into his cake. Shen Yuan reaches out to ruffle the boy's hair, a little guilty. He should have guessed that Luo Chengle *doesn't always* enjoy spending time with his father, but he just...

Shen Yuan doesn't even know what he needs, he just knows he needs to see him soon.

"Yes," Luo Binghe says. He sounds strangely tense on the other end, and for a moment, Shen Yuan's alarm bells keep ringing. Was he all right, perhaps? Had he returned safely? If there had been some kind of revolt, if he had had to use Xin Mo, how exhausted would he be? Would it really be appropriate for him to go out…? "This Lord will change his clothes and will be there soon."

"Good," Shen Yuan clears the lump in his throat. He taps his fingers on the table, anxious. "I… I'll wait for you. We'll wait for you," he quickly corrects himself. "Soon."

"Soon," and Luo Binghe hangs up. Shen Yuan stares at the screen with the icon of Luo Binghe's phone number. He doesn't even have a profile picture, and it's all Shen Yuan looks at until the screen stops announcing the call duration and turn off.

"See?" says Airplane, the bastard. "I told you. He'd come back."

"Father Emperor didn't say goodbye," Chengle mumbles sulkily, mercilessly attacking his cake. There are red crumbs in his mouth, and his tongue is tinged with a red color too chemical for Shen Yuan's taste. Perhaps the dessert menu isn't the best. "He didn't even make breakfast. Bad. He lost marriage points."

Shen Yuan chokes. Airplane looks at Luo Chengle with such amusement on his face that Shen Yuan literally has to hold onto the table to keep from reaching out to hit him.

"Marriage points? What's that, little one?"

"It's nonsense," Shen Yuan complains. Chengle laughs mischievously, dangling his little feet in the seat. "Chengle is joking."

"It's no joke!" the boy says. His little eyes shine with an emotion that is hard to describe. Shen Yuan realizes, looking at him, that he couldn't be more different from the frightened little boy he once knew. His cheeks are round, his eyes are large and radiant, and the smile on his face has a warmth he would never have imagined on the sad face of the little boy who had changed his life forever. "Father the Emperor wants to marry Baba Yuan. But Father the Emperor will never marry Baba Yuan if he doesn't know how to make him happy."

The little boy says this with such firmness that Shen Yuan buries his face in his hands, absolutely embarrassed. Seriously, this kid…!

"And if Father Emperor wants Baba Yuan," Chengle continues, his expression determined, "he has to collect lots and lots of marriage points. Like games! And happiness points! He has

to make Baba Yuan very, very happy! So happy that he's never sad." And Chengle's little eyes are the thing that makes Shen Yuan feel tears on the verge of forming in his throat when he looks at him, before leaning over to Airplane to whisper, "Baba Yuan is very sad. Sometimes. But it's a *secret*. But I make him happy! And if Father Emperor wants Baba Yuan, he has to make him *happier*. Or I'll never agree! They'll never get married!"

"Well, well," Airplane gives him the most mocking look. "What were you saying, Cucumber-bro?"

"Look in my direction again *and I'll stab you* with this spoon," Shen Yuan growls, and Airplane lets out a laugh.

Chengle rambles on, happily, with his cake and his pile of weird rules he just made up, apparently. Shen Yuan has no idea how to explain to the boy that… that none of that is going to happen. Yes, Luo Binghe is… close to him. Close to them. He supposes it makes sense that a boy who has never been close to his father except when he was with his mother could have such confused ideas about the intentions of a man like Luo Binghe, but first and foremost, and of course, really the only relevant one, *Shen Yuan is a man.*

Perhaps, if he were a woman, there would be a grain of... truth in everything Chengle is saying in that jovial tone of voice. Perhaps if Shen Yuan were a woman, *of course* there would be a ridiculous amount of... meaning in everything. Luo Binghe wanting to get closer, interested in luring her into his harem; why wouldn't he, after all? A new maternal figure who actually knows how to take care of a child is firm enough to make Luo Binghe go from a ruthless and cruel despotic emperor to someone who fell to his knees in regret for his past mistakes, and of course she...

But Shen Yuan is not a *she.* The thought makes him feel sick, dizzy, and horribly ill.

Of course, it matches the jingle of the doorbell as it opens. They're at the back of the coffee shop, in seats away from the entrance and closer to the small library space, and Luo Binghe, his hair bristling and wild from the humidity and wind, his tight-fitting black clothes and a black trench coat flapping around him like a cape, is searching among the tables. His pale face is pink from the erratic wind. The only thing that breaks the monochromatic nature of his clothes is the exposed fake jade guanyin hanging around his neck.

His expression is serious. The cashier welcomes him, and only when Shen Yuan waves his hand, capturing his attention, does Luo Binghe relax his face into a smile. He nods to the cashier as he passes, and heads to the back where Shen Yuan steps aside to allow him to sit.

"Yuan-ge. Chengle," Luo Binghe greets them both. Chengle grimaces in affront, turning his face to the side with his mouth turned down. Airplane doesn't even seem offended at not being included in the greeting, which Shen Yuan thinks is the smart thing to do, until the idiot opens his mouth and:

"So, here it is," says Airplane, the absolute bastard, pointing at Luo Binghe with his hand. "Chengle, you little devil, did you finish your cake? Shall we read some more of your little books? I think I want to see what else they have in there. I haven't read a paper manga in *years."*

“Uncle Ai-plein,” Chengle complains, pouting. There’s no cake left on his plate, but it’s clear from the glances Luo Chengle is giving his emperor father that he *doesn’t want* to leave him alone with Shen Yuan there. “But… but…”

“No buts,” says Airplane, standing up and extending his hand to Chengle. “Your parents are going to talk about adult things. Okay, your Baba is going to complain a lot and be melodramatic, but your Emperor Father is going to listen and see if he can recover some of those points he lost.”

The look Luo Binghe gives him is heartbreakingly curious. Shen Yuan pretends to ignore him, toying with the last sip of cold tea at the bottom of his disposable cup.

"I don't want to," Chengle complains, on the verge of throwing a tantrum. "I don't want to, I don't want to..."

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want to,” Shen Yuan says quickly. Chengle looks at him with hopeful eyes. “But if you don’t see what else there is, how can we buy you new books you’ll like for your new room?”

Those seem to be the magic words summoned. Chengle protests just a little longer, but it's clear Shen Yuan has won; he eventually stands up, and only after Shen Yuan wipes his face with a napkin and his hands with sanitizer and another napkin so he doesn't risk getting the books dirty does Airplane pick up the boy (complaining a little about how much bigger he's getting and how he won't be squashed long before he gets crushed) and takes him away.

The waitress arrives. Shen Yuan orders a hot chocolate for Luo Binghe and lets him choose a pastry, but honestly, Luo Binghe watches and seemingly chooses one at random, with pistachios. When the waitress leaves, Luo Binghe turns slightly in his seat, looking at him, and only then does Shen Yuan notice that as things stand, Luo Binghe is practically cornering him in his seat against the wall.

“Yuan-ge wanted to talk to me?” he says, his voice low. Shen Yuan clears his throat, trying to undo the nervous lump.

“I…” He tries not to focus on any of the emotions that were drowning him. It’s as if he’s unraveled the mess inside a cabinet of fragile dishes, and he’s trying to rearrange them or keep them from falling and breaking with one hand groping blindly and the other holding the door closed to keep everything from falling out. Shen Yuan squeezes his eyes shut, forcing himself to take another deep breath to control his temper before saying, “You’re *gone*.”

“This Lord apologizes,” Luo Binghe says so quickly it seems almost automatic. The apology, ridiculous as it is, only makes Shen Yuan feel more vulnerable and angry. It’s a practically automatic response, and he thinks, with a sense of hilarity, how many wives out of those three hundred have ever made the move to abandon him? Why is he even comparing himself to wives, anyway? “A major problem arose. This Lord is working on something important, and it… became completely unstable. No one else could have dealt with it.”

“Yes.” Shen Yuan knows. He knows, because he knows Luo Binghe is the Protagonist, because he knows he’s the most powerful, the only one capable of… the only one who can do

anything he sets his mind to, really. “A major problem. I know. I understand.”

Shen Yuan stares at the bottom of his cup. He turns it over in his hands, unable to *understand.* He feels so much that it corrodes his entire body, it's like a poison: it climbs up his arms, tangles in his throat, makes his mind wander. When, when was he ever so irrational, so visceral?

Even when he was dishing out criticism after criticism, he'd always had a... theoretical control. His days were boring, ridiculous, and gray. A repetitive, repetitive routine. Reading PIDW was the only thing that made him... *feel* anything other than just being so bored and exhausted. And he felt it in a much more controlled way. He got emotional, he obsessed, he couldn't let go, he couldn't stop thinking about it. But he could step aside, breathe, and the emotions wouldn't choke him.

Now he can't move away. He doesn't even understand *what* he feels, only that he feels, like a tidal surge and a storm, and he feels confused, humiliated, ashamed. His fingers tremble on the disposable cup.

“Yuan-ge is angry,” Luo Binghe says, so low his voice sounds like a caress. And Shen Yuan wasn’t *angry* per se, but suddenly it’s as if the anger reaches there, a distant memory of something that was also there.

“Yes. No,” he says, shaking his head. “I don’t know. I don’t…” and he opens his mouth, but the words don’t come out. He covers his face with his hands. His eyes sting. His throat burns. “You weren’t here when I woke up. I thought I…”

Shen Yuan stops. His tongue is heavy in his mouth.

He thought he, what? What had screwed up? What had made Luo Binghe leave? He, Shen Yuan, hadn't done *anything wrong.* Nothing wrong. *Nothing* was wrong. He was a perfectly normal man with normal physiological reactions, and Luo Binghe hadn't even noticed it, hadn't even been made aware of it, so there was no way Luo Binghe could *think* or feel disgusted or...

The discomfort hits him straight to the stomach. For a moment of panic, Shen Yuan feels nauseous.

“This Lord was called away for the emergency before dawn,” Luo Binghe says. His words are strangely measured. They remind Shen Yuan of the kind of manner he himself might use to speak to Chengle when his child is feeling particularly unstable, without raising his tone, without changing his emotions or the softness of his voice so that the child doesn’t feel he’s being attacked. “It wasn’t this one’s intention to delay, or to stay there for so long. This one believed that he would return before Yuan-ge and Chengle woke up.”

“I know,” says Shen Yuan. Because Luo Binghe has proven that disappearing just for the hell of it isn’t on his to-do list. “I’m sorry. I don’t understand why…” And, surprising even himself, Shen Yuan finds himself laughing humorlessly. “I don’t even have any sense today. I’m sorry.”

The waitress arrives at that moment. She places the cup of a big hot chocolate and the slice of cake in front of Luo Binghe. She leans across the table slightly, with a smile that's clearly meant to be flirtatious, and Shen Yuan presses his temple right above the stressed heartbeat, sighing.

“Would you want anything else?” she asks, in the typical tone Shen Yuan has only heard in over-the-top flirting in movies or trashy dramas. “Any other desserts, any other drinks…?”

‘My number?’ Shen Yuan asks irritably in his mind.

When Luo Binghe answers, his tone cold and startling: “Thank you, but I’ve already got everything what I want. You can leave.”

Shen Yuan moves his face away from his hand only to see the waitress seem to force a smile before walking away with the tray in her hands. Shen Yuan looks at Luo Binghe with a raised eyebrow. The truth is, he's never heard anyone say something like 'you can leave’ to a waitress, much less in Luo Binghe's tone, as if he's getting rid of a particularly annoying servant.

“Did this one have a good choice of words?” Luo Binghe asks, looking in Shen Yuan’s direction now. His tone of voice… good. It’s a far cry from the coldness of a moment ago. “This one is still… trying to get used to these informal manners.”

“You were good,” Shen Yuan says. He takes a last sip of his now-iced tea and another deep breath. Control. He needs… he needs self-control. Whatever his head is feeling unable to process properly, *he can* deal with it. “You’ll get better, in time. Though you don’t have to. You’re not… obligated to stay so long that you’re forced to…”

It's as if the same visceral poison were creeping up from his stomach to his chest. Luo Binghe stares at him as if there were some interesting puzzle on Shen Yuan's face, and honestly, Shen Yuan feels as if his entire body, his being, his mind have become a chaotic, gigantic, thousand-piece puzzle with no reference image.

“This Lord finds it necessary,” he says. Shen Yuan feels his breath catch between his teeth. “Chengle seems to… enjoy this world,” and his eyes, dark, unfathomable, shift to where the boy is reading manga. It’s a little difficult to see in full, but from what Shen Yuan can see, he’s now holding another of Sakura’s volumes, wearing an excited expression while next to him, Airplane seems to be reading something that looks like an average shojo manga, with a pink cover and flowers. Who would have thought it? “It’s more suitable for someone like him, with a heart like his. As long as Chengle chooses to grow up here, this Lord will stay by his side.”

Shen Yuan exhales a breath he didn't even know he was holding. It's absolutely ridiculous of him, he thinks, but it's as if his entire chest feels much lighter.

“Good,” Shen Yuan says, and realizes he means it. “That’s good.”

Luo Binghe gives him a small smile that makes Shen Yuan find it exceedingly easy to pretend his world hasn't been turned upside down all afternoon by some utter idiocy. Luo

Binghe is back, as always; he hasn't left never to return, it's not Shen Yuan's fault (what would it be, really?), and he plans to stay. He... Shen Yuan can handle that, right now, far better than anyone else.

· ⋆ · ⊹ ✦ ⊹ · ⋆ ·

Airplane follows them to the apartment, but only stays briefly to gather his things, play with Chengle a little, cry over the tiny wooden beasts moving in his palms, and leave before the storm really hits, something that seems to be getting on his nerves like it would anyone, he supposes. Shen Yuan isn't entirely sure Airplane's neighborhood is *that* safe, since he always tries to arrive before dark.

He's also a lot more certain that Airplane has slipped a tiny wooden Black Moon Rhinoceros-Python into his hoodie pocket, but honestly, he can't even blame him. It's not one of Chengle's favorites anyway, so it's not like he'll notice it among all the toys he owns.

With Luo Binghe in the apartment, Shen Yuan can feel… almost normal. Somehow. He laughs to himself as he completes the therapist's damned homework—God, Dr. Jun is going to have a *field day* with this particular day—and when he's completely out of things to do, he finds himself sitting in the kitchen, simply watching Luo Binghe and Luo Chengle cook. There's a small stool next to where Luo Binghe is standing, a stool Shen Yuan is extremely certain he didn't have before today, and Luo Chengle is only slightly clumsily kneading some dough to make udon noodles.

“Can we use peas?” Chengle asks, watching Luo Binghe work on blending various vegetables into a sauce reduction. It smells wonderful.

“As many as you want,” Luo Binghe hums. As always when he cooks, his hair is in a high bun; however, this time his sleeves cover his wrists. Only when Luo Binghe reaches out to reach the bag of peas on the other side of the counter does Shen Yuan blink, confused.

“Binghe,” he calls, and Luo Binghe turns around. Chengle turns around too, clearly pouting as usual. Shen Yuan gives the boy a small smile, urging him to get on with the dough. “Come here for a moment.”

Luo Binghe nods. He steps closer, and Shen Yuan tugs at the sleeve of his sweater, looking down at him. Luo Binghe puts his hand down too quickly, covering the exposed skin with blackened blotches that look darker than bruises, a tense expression on his face as if he actually notices what Shen Yuan just saw, but Shen Yuan watches, trying *to comprehend* what he's seeing.

“We’ll talk later,” he warns, giving Chengle a knowing look. Luo Binghe gives him a smile that seems meant to be reassuring, but succeeds in doing just the opposite. Shen Yuan sighs, letting him go back to cooking.

“Is Baba Yuan going to scold you later?” Chengle whispers; he doesn’t look *as* happy as he probably would have been on any other day. Despite everything, Shen Yuan finds himself smiling. Luo Binghe stirs the sauce, looking a little uncomfortable as he hesitates over how to respond.

“I think so,” Luo Binghe says, and he doesn’t sound like he’s willing to avoid it. “Let’s hope he won’t be so bad and cruel to me.”

“Mmph,” and Chengle is a little frown, his hands covered in flour around the dough, just before he says, “If the dinner is really, *really good* and I like it *a lot*, I’ll tell Baba Yuan to make it a *little* not too bad for Father Emperor.”

Luo Binghe smiles. Even from where he stands, Shen Yuan knows it's the kind of smile that reaches his eyes. Thinking about it makes his chest feel too warm.

“Then this Lord will have to try hard,” Luo Binghe hums.

They continue at that, in tranquility. Shen Yuan goes into the living room, changing the children's channel just to escape the songs for a minute. He plays any channel, and only when the television stops at the news does Shen Yuan realize he really hasn't watched the news in a long time. It's not like he watches *much* TV for such things: if he needs to find out something particularly unpleasant, he'll find out from the news on his phone. He doesn't find it necessary to...

“...and as we've been covering throughout the day, the National Meteorological Center has issued an orange-level warning for the western part of Beijing...” the presenter announces, his expression serious and intended to convey urgency. *“Residents are advised not to leave their homes unless absolutely necessary.”*

Shen Yuan sits on the sofa, gripping the remote control tightly, staring at the images in bewilderment. The presenter is replaced by images, probably recorded by specific drones. Shen Yuan recognizes the Miaofengshan area, with its mountains and open spaces, by just a sight. He is extremely certain that his mother has at least a few photographs of the temples in the family house.

The shocking thing isn't, of course, the mountains, but the way the clouds swirl above them. They're thick, so dense they resemble physical forms, a blizzard clearly brewing for something that could be catastrophic.

The screen shows pre-recorded images of a reporter. It's a replay of this afternoon, hours earlier; her scarf flaps in the fierce force of the wind, whipping the microphone with a whine that barely lets her be heard over the howls of the unfolding storm.

“As you can see behind me, the gusts have intensified since early this morning,” she says, pointing to the almost monster-like storm, covering the skies, skirting the mountains, descending like a living entity. *“The locals claim they haven't seen anything like it. Visibility is practically zero, and the storm shows no signs of dissipating.”*

Homemade footage shot from cars on the highway is superimposed: the headlights barely break through the blizzard, and for an instant, a fierce flash crosses the cloudy skies, like a flash of lightning. It even sounds like a stormy howl tearing through the clouds and the skies.

"Experts are talking about an extraordinary atmospheric phenomenon," the presenter's voiceover says. *"For more details, let's continue with the replay of the two-o'clock analysis*

panel."

Shen Yuan stares at the enormous chaos with an incredulous expression. Miaofengshan is relatively close, so he supposes the horrendous weather in the city all day makes sense. But still…

"It's a cold front combined with moisture trapped in updrafts," explains one of the meteorologists, an elderly man in a boring suit. *"The conditions are... exceptional, but they're explained in terms of climate change over the past few decades."*

"What's unusual, unlike other similar events in recent years, is the suddenness of this meteorological phenomenon," explains another meteorologist. *"Normally, these storms have a gradual transition. Here we're talking minutes."*

Shen Yuan watches with a distraught expression as the meteorologists talk, chatting amongst themselves about the effects of climate change, how these kinds of storms are a warning sign of how big business is ruining the environment, others discussing whether the economic impact is really worth it compared to destroying the world we live in. Shen Yuan watches the mountain, the way the storm spirals around it, as if it were being pulled by a magnetic field much stronger and more dangerous than a simple weather disaster.

In fact, Shen Yuan is absolutely certain he's seen something exactly like it before. In a very, very different place.

His phone displays a thumbs-up message from Airplane, letting him know it arrived safely. Shen Yuan takes a pic of the TV screen where the mountain borders and sends it to Airplane.

ShenY: [image]

ShangHH: ???

ShangHH: wtf

Shen Yuan enters Zhongdian, searching through the first two hundred chapters of PIDW until he finds the exact chapter. It's easy to find by name, especially since it says '*XIN MO: PART 1'* in capital letters.

Airplane had never been stingy with his work. As much as Shen Yuan had hundreds of hostile words to say to him about his poor writing, his recycling of settings and characters, the truth was that Airplane not only used PIDW to survive, but *invested* in his novel. More than once, a chapter important to the plot contained art that Airplane had commissioned, and now that Shen Yuan knew Airplane, he only could imagine the enormous sacrifice that had meant for him. How much he loved the story he created, even if it was so trashy, to put money from his own survival into making the reading experience better.

In the illustration, Luo Binghe's back is turned, but he is not the center of attention. The real focus is the high mountain range reaching out like claws to scratch the red and black skies, the fierce storm spiraling around the highest peak, the peak Luo Binghe had to reach to obtain Xin Mo and become his master.

Even if it is a stylized illustration, or perhaps more likely because it is an illustration that does not seek to depict reality exactly as it could be, what is even more alarming is the way in which the illustrated image and the ferocious storm centering on Miaofengshan, no more than an hour from Beijing, look practically *the same*.

Shen Yuan takes the screenshot and sends it to Airplane. Then he locks his screen, turns off the TV, and flops down on his back across the couch, staring at the ceiling until his eyes burn, having no idea *what it's supposed* to mean and praying that, please, *please,* there's a quick fix that doesn't involve him getting too involved.

Chapter End Notes

Chengle: I'm totally against Father Emperor marrying Baba Yuan
Chengle, too: BUT IF HE'S GOING TO DO IT, HE MUST AT LEAST MEET ALL THESE *unfolds a VERY BIG list* :c

SY: *absolutely irrational and emotional with no idea why 90% of his emotions are what they are, on the verge of complete collapse*
Xin Mo, in a corner: Oopsie

I SAID THERE WAS A CHEKOV'S GUN. I SAID IT WASN'T THE FLOWER. CONGRATULATIONS TO THOSE WHO STARTED PLAYING GUESS GUESS, GOLD STARS TO ALL OF YOU

SY would rather have an identity crisis than accept that he's gay. Same, same bro, I'd also be capable of collapsing over anything before accepting that a MAN attracts me /j Getting into Shen Yuan's psyche is SO exhausting sometimes. IT'S fun, YES, A LOT. IT MAKES ME WANT TO ANALYZE HIM WITH A SMALL MAGNIFYING GLASS, but at the same time it's like... bro.... BROOOO *shakes him*

Airplane is the coolest best friend and cool uncle at the same time, because anything is possible in this life, and he's proving it. We love him here (I admit that he wasn't actually going to appear in this chapter. I only made him appear because a) it was convenient for SY's crisis and b) so there wouldn't be any transmigration theories about our hamster when he disappears from the screen for more than one chapter. Seriously guys, who hurt you so much???/j)

KFNDJKFDS WHAT'S GOING ON WITH XIN MO AND BINGHE AND *WHY*. WE'LL FIND OUT ON WEDNESDAY. I THINK
I HOPE YOU REALLY LIKED THE CHAPTER, MWAH I'M REALLY HAVING A

LOT OF FUN SHARING THIS CHAOTIC-CRAZY-GREAT JOURNEY WITH YOU. YOU SPOIL ME. YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL. YOU'RE AWESOME. I LOVE YOU. AAAA you know, kudo-comment-interaction, YOU MAKE ME SO HAPPY!!! I'M ALWAYS SO THANK YOU!!!
SEE YOU SOON!!!

Chapter 25: First glimpse of a future

Chapter Notes

> THIS CHAPTER ARRIVED LATE BECAUSE TODAY I FELL ASLEEP IN THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, and guess who forgot to set an alarm and missed their train home? Yeah. I had to wait 1 hour 45 minutes for the other one. Anyway. AT LEAST I SLEPT. CELEBRATE WITH ME *happy noises*
> THANK YOU SO MUCH AS ALWAYS TO ALL THE READERS, COMMENTERS, AND PEOPLE WHO SUPPORT ME. LOOK, WE HAVE ANOTHER FANART. YOU CAN SEE IT HERE :DDDD You make me happy and spoil me. Thanks you veryvery much
>
> Chapter warnings: mentions of minor injuries, self-stigma, denial is a river in egypt your unreliable narrator is gay, etc., etc.
>
> ENJOY THE CHAPTER! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Luo Chengle is asleep after a dinner that Shen Yuan manages to keep normal and play for a while with all his tigers until he almost started nodding off with sleep among them, Shen Yuan simply sits on the sofa next to Luo Binghe, bringing his knees to his chest, taking deep breaths.

“About today,” he says, and Luo Binghe leans in just a little. Shen Yuan would panic at the closeness, but in reality, he has so many reasons to panic that he’s sure they’re canceling each other out. “…that was the emergency, wasn’t it? Are you okay? What happened?”

“This Lord is *perfectly fine*,” Luo Binghe says quickly, and Shen Yuan sighs.

“Let me see it,” he demands. He doesn’t even know where he gets the courage, or the ability to give such an order. He doesn’t even know why Luo Binghe reaches out his arm to him, without even hesitating. In fact, when Shen Yuan looks up to see his expression, even he seems amazed that he’s obeying just because.

Shen Yuan doesn't have much interest in thinking about any of that right now.

He rolls up the sleeve of his sweater, tugging at the sleeveless T-shirt underneath. The white skin is marred by dark bruises, and Shen Yuan can feel so much *dread* it's almost a nauseating shock creeping up his throat. Luo Binghe isn't supposed to be hurt.

“You’re not healing,” he says. He tries to find a shape; it’s not like it looks like a hand, or the product of a battle. The bruises are mostly on the inside of his arm, and with a sensation

similar to dizziness, Shen Yuan can compare it to his own arms and the needle scars when an inexperienced nurse draws blood, only fifty times worse. “Was it Xin Mo’s fault?”

Luo Binghe raises his eyebrows just a little. When he laughs, it sounds soft like a tired exhalation.

“This Lord shouldn’t be surprised by Yuan-ge’s vast knowledge of so many things,” he murmurs, and although he seems to say it with humor, he sounds exhausted. “It’s even harder to have Xin Mo in this world.”

Shen Yuan looks at him curiously. Luo Binghe sighs.

“The qi flow in this world is *low,*” he explains, with the kind of frazzled tone Shen Yuan has learned to recognize when he really doesn’t want to talk about something. That’s a shame, because Luo Binghe won’t put himself in any potential danger in a world without a trained healer to look after him. “Even in this Lord’s world, with the realms combined and what that’s done to the world’s qi flow…” Luo Binghe frowns. His face darkens, just a little. Shen Yuan doesn’t try to guess, because guessing means his mind will wander to all thoughts of the Realm-Fusion Arc, one of the most emotionally distressing in Shen Yuan’s opinion. “In this world, with such a low qi flow, Xin Mo is more powerful.”

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath. He tries to control the ridiculous trembling in his hands.

It's not the best day to deal with any of that. Maybe that's exactly why he wants to get it over with.

“Xin Mo is always powerful *and* dangerous. Truly, even with its capabilities, why continue using as your main weapon a sword that *literally* influences and feeds on the heart demons? Truly…” Shen Yuan supposes he might be sounding overly whiny about it, but if he’s honest with himself, it’s either this or scream. Or cry. And he doesn’t want either of the latter two. He’s had too long a day already. “There are weapons… well, they don’t make *interdimensional portals*, but… they would do less damage in the long run.”

“This Lord is aware,” Luo Binghe says, and unsurprisingly, he sounds grumpy. “However, if Yuan-ge and Chengle are in this world, this Emperor…”

“Yes, I know,” Shen Yuan sighs. He rubs the sides of his face, taking off his glasses and rubbing them over his eyes. He’s *too* tired, but he feels like pushing the conversation to another day would be…would be too much. “What happened? You can tell me, really. It’s not like I’ll be horrified or anything,” Shen Yuan lies, because he’d rather know what kind of catastrophe is unfolding before he’s left in the dark. Either way, he’ll have nightmares about it.

Luo Binghe takes a moment to reply. He looks at the bruises on his arm, then sighs bitterly before saying, “This Lord enlisted Mobei Jun’s help to find a natural location, with abundant qi flow. And even *that* abundant qi flow is weak, but it’s better than the rest of this… city of steel and glass.” And Luo Binghe seems to struggle with his own words, his pale skin looking even paler around the wounds. Shen Yuan realizes, a little with astonishment, that this may

also be the first time Luo Binghe has seen himself injured in a long time. “This Emperor… found a mountain.”

“I know,” Shen Yuan says. He reaches for the remote control, turning on the TV. He doesn’t even need to search for the news: he tunes into a random news channel and there it is, a nearly 24-hour coverage of experts discussing the storm’s ferocity, its implications for the environment, interviews with locals…

Luo Binghe looks at the screen with a complicated expression.

“This Lord didn’t know that would happen,” he says, in a voice that almost sounds sad. Now he’s the one rubbing his face too hard, looking exhausted. Shen Yuan feels a little sorry for him; in fact, if he had been taking care of that mess since early morning, then arrived, and Shen Yuan had just acted like an idiot, Luo Binghe hadn’t had any chance to rest.

“I didn’t think you did it on purpose,” Shen Yuan says quickly. “But it’s… well. Similar. Like the peak of the mountain range where Xin Mo was, with the storm clouds gathering.”

Luo Binghe gives him *another* look. He doesn't ask, and Shen Yuan supposes it's okay that he doesn't ask because he can't really answer coherently right now.

“What exactly happened?” he asks finally. Luo Binghe sighs.

“This Lord managed to make a containment array, even if he can *only now* understand how rudimentary it was,” Luo Binghe explains. He doesn’t sound proud at all. “With the natural qi flowing in the mountain, a little help from Mobei Jun, and my own power, we were able to bind Xin Mo to the mountain. That way, Xin Mo wouldn’t be directly in this Lord’s possession all the time, and its influence over him would be… lesser.” His expression thickens. “Its power is… devastating, *here*. This Lord would have done *too many* things in this world to follow Xin Mo’s desires without any control over it, if this one had continued to keep him around.”

Shen Yuan grimaces. Involuntarily, his mind takes him back to those early chapters of PIDW, with Luo Binghe unable to deny Xin Mo's desires, gripped by a fever of violence and lust. The chapters with slaughter and abyssal beast hunts had been *pure delight*, even if the same couldn't be said for the whole papapa with succubi and female demons all around.

…Yeah, maybe even if it’s causing an orange-alert-level climate disaster, it might have been a good idea for Luo Binghe not to have Xin Mo’s influence breathing down his neck. Shen Yuan isn’t too sure what to feel or think about the first encounter that sent him to the hospital, and if Luo Binghe ever brings any woman from the neighborhood, Shen Yuan *will burn* that sofa. Luo Binghe has enough wives! Enough, enough! He doesn’t need any more!

“So I take it the containment array failed?” Shen Yuan asks. Luo Binghe nods, looking at the screen. Now, the screen displays a satellite map, depicting how the storm will progress and the expected forecast for the coming weeks: severe snowstorms that could even reach the capital. With luck, some say, the orange alert would remain in effect only in the Miaofengshan area for the immediate approach.

Luo Binghe doesn't reply. Judging by his expression, he looks *worse.*

“It just *failed*, didn’t it?” Shen Yuan insists, a new wave of panic rising. “The containment array failed, Xin Mo started to reveal and make disasters but, eh, that’s all? Please *tell me* it was just that.”

Luo Binghe sighs again. His expression is exhausted.

“Xin Mo began corrupting the natural flow of qi in the mountains,” he says, and Shen Yuan feels like he’s choking on his own breath. What *the hell.* “This Emperor hadn’t believed… or considered that something like this could happen; natural qi wasn’t supposed to be affected, but this one… he considered it wrong, accustomed to a much stronger natural qi flow.”

Luo Binghe remains silent. Shen Yuan remains expectant, his heartbeat almost in his ears, his breathing strained.

“As his master, this Lord can summon Xin Mo no matter where it is, so distance is never an issue other than to distance me from its direct influence. Because of that alone, this Lord allowed himself to become distracted and…” Luo Binghe has the most complex expression. It is guilt, Shen Yuan can tell. It is anger. It is frustration. It is something that seems larger and more powerful than him as Luo Binghe runs a hand through his hair, clearly *annoyed*. “Xin Mo… used the containment array’s connection to break it and begin poisoning the qi of the mountains. It will take this Lord until the storm passes to fix this, but *he will.* The mountain will be cleansed without consequence. Yuan-ge need not worry about it,” and Luo Binghe has a determined expression on his face now, watching intently as the unexpected and ferocious storm followed. “This Emperor will be able to.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Shen Yuan says honestly. He seems to touch something in Luo Binghe, because the tension in his shoulders fades. As if there’s something Luo Binghe *can’t* do, “So… is that all it is? Xin Mo acted like a bitch, but you collared it again and now it’s under control? Will the mountain go back to normal as soon as it’s free from the influence of that ugly weirdo demonic qi? Won’t the world end or something?”

Luo Binghe's shoulders shake. He seems, as always, surprised by his own laughter.

“I’m afraid Yuan-ge’s world will remain just as boring,” Luo Binghe says, with a false sadness. His expression seems to relax. “In this world, there are things Chengle enjoys. In this world, there is the family Yuan-ge loves. In this world, Yuan-ge and Chengle can be… happier.” And now, Luo Binghe looks at him. It’s Shen Yuan who has to look away, suddenly nervous. “This Emperor couldn’t forgive himself for ruining it for either of them.”

Shen Yuan exhales slowly. He's relieved, he realizes. An impending disaster, but one that doesn't involve the absolute destruction of the world as he knows it, but only... putting a stop to Xin Mo? Well, that's not easy at all. Not even in the world of PIDW! And if it all ends up with Luo Binghe having to leave until he can figure out how to contain Xin Mo...

Shen Yuan doesn't even want to think about it.

“Perhaps,” Shen Yuan murmurs, thinking about the possibilities, the different options. The truth is, there aren’t many; Xin Mo had been so special for a reason, but something different…? “Can we find a way to make another portal? Something permanent that doesn’t involve Xin Mo, and you can leave it in your world?”

Luo Binghe looks at him curiously. There's a strange smile on his face.

“There are few swords with similar power,” Luo Binghe hums. Still, it’s not a ‘no,’ Shen Yuan notes. Despite everything, he wants to believe that Luo Binghe has faith that there is a choice. “Even the skills of a pureblood demon like Mobei Jun can’t forge portals between such different worlds.”

“Yeah, I figured that,” Shen Yuan chirps into his forehead. Well, *he’ll* have to ask Airplane; if anyone can know or come up with something, it’s probably him. Not until it’s ten to twelve. Shen Yuan isn’t going to incentivize Airplane’s poor sleep schedule by texting him so late. “Just an idea. I’ll check it out later and… see if I can be helpful.”

Luo Binghe looks at him. His eyes are narrowed in a warm gaze, something that makes Shen Yuan feel strange in his own skin. It's not unpleasant, but it's so uncomfortable that he feels a little more dizzy than he'd like.

“Yuan-ge shouldn’t worry,” Luo Binghe says. He doesn’t sound cold, tense, or hostile. His tone of voice is distant, conveyed through a complicated gaze that Shen Yuan doesn’t dare return. “This Lord can resolve this on his own.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Shen Yuan repeats. He fiddles with the TV remote between his fingers, just to do something with them while avoiding Luo Binghe’s gaze. “Even so, if I can do something, I will. We’re… a family, aren’t we?” He finds himself saying it, repeating it on repeat in his head. That… that makes sense, he supposes. Even if it’s through caring for Chengle, loving him, protecting him, and seeking to raise him in a way that’s right for him, Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan are… family. A particular family, yes, honestly, but… “Families help each other. If I can, let me help you.”

…It’s not like Shen Yuan had the ability to do so, anyway, but perhaps, help him by reading some things, compiling useful files, looking through some old scrolls? Besides being useful in seeing an alternative, it might well help his own curiosity about all those things in Luo Binghe’s world that hadn’t been able to fully develop throughout the narrative and Shen Yuan had always been too curious about–

“*Yuan-ge*,” and when Luo Binghe speaks, it sounds as if Shen Yuan has punched him. Shen Yuan turns to look at him, worried, to see his face with raised, furrowed brows. He seems to have an expression a little too close to suffering for Shen Yuan’s liking. “Yuan-ge shouldn’t say such things lightly,” Luo Binghe warns.

Shen Yuan finds himself smiling. He's not even aware he's smiling until his voice is almost relieved as he says,

“You dumb,” he complains. “It’s not taken lightly. We’re a family.”

Luo Binghe's pained expression grows even more serious. Shen Yuan sighs, reaching across the sofa to pat his head… which is probably not the best move, when Luo Binghe simply pulls him around like a rag doll, catching him in a hug before he even has a chance to touch his head.

"Yuan-ge," Luo Binghe murmurs, his head buried in the crook of Shen Yuan's neck. His breathing sends shivers down Shen Yuan's spine as he returns the embrace, tense and uncomfortable in every way, gently patting the man's back and shoulders. "Yuan-ge will never tire of making this Lord remember what it was like to truly *feel*, will he?"

Shen Yuan finds himself laughing when, as if struck by a blow, he remembers himself comforting a little Chengle. His words are vague, distant, and inexact after so much time, but they ring true now: his Father Emperor had a sleeping heart, a heart that had gone through so much pain that it had closed itself off from feeling like others, seeking to hide from everything that hurt him.

Well, there would be no more harm or suffering for Luo Binghe, as far as Shen Yuan could think of. The entire main plot of PIDW had ended, and even in hardship, Luo Binghe was still strong enough that none of it would affect him anymore. There was no need for Luo Binghe's heart to remain in sleep.

Hugging Luo Binghe a little tighter, like the hugs he usually gives Chengle when the child crawls into his arms, Shen Yuan can only think that it's a good thing he'd made a promise he could keep to his sweet boy. Even if it took a while, and he continued to rediscover who he was, Luo Binghe had a heart full of emotions and a vulnerable fragility that was now awakening.

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Shen Yuan wakes up a little later than usual, with a child and a stuffed tiger climbing on him, and hearing sounds that he has a hard time identifying.

"…he's asleep now," Luo Binghe's voice says from the hallway, drifting in through the half-open door. He seems to be on the phone, which Shen Yuan finds curious: only his family has Binghe's number, and he doesn't think there's any reason for any of them to call him casually. At least, judging by the more relaxed tone of his voice, *it's not* Jiu-ge. "Yes, Chengle too. Yes… Yes…" More silence, probably while someone else is speaking on the other line. "I'll tell him." Another moment of silence. Then: "Thank you, Yu-mei. Have a nice day."

Shen Yuan tries his damnedest not to wake the two sleeping figures above him until he suddenly remembers that one of them is a stuffed animal, so he just picks it up and places it on the bed next to Chengle. The tiger stretches, yawning and curling up next to the boy again, and by the time Shen Yuan finishes getting out of bed, they are both asleep again.

His muscles are tense and uncomfortable today, which is only natural given the weather—the storm seems to have finally broken in earnest and reached the city sometime during the early morning, because beyond the fogged-up windows, the snow is a thick white blanket under an overcast sky that still seems to keep the sun so far away that it wouldn't be strange to feel as

if it were nighttime. Shen Yuan uses his cane to reach the door, almost colliding face first with Luo Binghe's chest.

“Oh,” he says, his face flushed. “I woke up. I…”

Then, Shen Yuan notices that the phone Luo Binghe is holding is *his.*

“Yu-mei called,” Binghe says gently. “Yuan-ge had forgotten his phone on the table by the sofa tonight. She was worried because Yuan-ge weren’t answering.”

“Oh,” Shen Yuan repeats, a little dazed, as he retrieves his phone. Not only does he discover it’s later than he had originally thought, but there’s also a long list of messages from his Meimei dating back quite early. “Oops. I forgot.”

Since eight, Meimei has been texting him to ask if he has plans for the evening. At eight-thirty, she teased that he must surely be fast asleep. At nine, she insisted if everything was okay. By ten, she really started to worry. It's after ten-thirty, and Meimei has decided to call, since Binghe apparently wasn't answering her messages either.

“This one hasn’t fully learned how to reply to those messages yet,” Luo Binghe explains, sounding a little embarrassed about it. Shen Yuan sighs, shaking his head. He really doesn’t expect Luo Binghe to learn in a day or two, or even a week, something that anyone would learn in months. Even a Protagonist like him should have his limits, right?

“It’s okay,” Shen Yuan sighs. The aroma of breakfast is rich even so far from the kitchen, something that smells exceptionally fried to his poor stomach, but probably to Chengle’s liking. “Wait a moment, I need to go to the bathroom. Uh, could you wake Chengle up?”

Shen Yuan slips out, still holding his phone. Then, as he emerges from the bathroom with his teeth brushed, water soaking the collar of his pajamas after washing his face, and a self-diagnosis of needing a haircut soon after brushing it after finding the messy bird's nest on his head, he stumbles a little toward the couch just to sit down.

“Is Baba Yuan feeling bad today?” Chengle asks, and Shen Yuan leans forward a little, trying to listen with a grimace; the voice comes softly from the hallway through the half-open door of the room. “It’s *so* late. Yuan-ge always wakes us up early! So I can’t play for long before lunch. And breakfast is so close to lunch! I don’t like it.”

“Your Baba Yuan was very tired,” Luo Binghe’s voice says. There’s a gentleness to his tone that surprises Shen Yuan a little, but in a good way. It’s nice to see that behind all the cruel emperor masks, there’s still some real affection for a child. “Yesterday was a very ugly day for him.”

“You left,” Chengle accuses. His voice is still sleepy. “Baba Yuan gets very sad when you’re not around. He’s *always* sad, but *even sadder* when you’re not here. I don’t like it.”

Shen Yuan takes his cane, struggling to stand up and go to intervene before Chengle continues talking nonsense, when he hears very, very quietly:

“I don’t want Baba Yuan to be sad like Mom,” he says, and Shen Yuan feels like he’s been punched straight in the stomach. “What if he gets so sad that he doesn’t love me anymore?”

“That won’t happen,” Luo Binghe says, with a gentle firmness that’s almost devastating. Shen Yuan feels a lump against his throat, a choking sensation he can’t quite put into words. “Your Baba Yuan is going to a very, very special healer, who’s going to help him not be so sad. Even your Uncle Yue told me to make sure he goes without fail, even if he doesn’t want to. And even if your Baba Yuan is very sad, like your mother, he will always love you. Just like her.”

Chengle makes a sound that doesn't sound entirely convinced. Shen Yuan backs away, lying down on the sofa with a feeling of dizziness.

On one hand, he supposes it makes sense that Chengle would be afraid of something like this. After all, a child whose mother practically abandoned him in the grip of massive postpartum depression won't have any good memories associated with sad people of any kind. But Shen Yuan is pretty sure he's not… not even close to how Mingyan could be. Yes, he might have a harder time moving sometimes when he's gotten too comfortable, and occasionally take twice as long as Chengle or Binghe to finish his food even if his portion is smaller than both of theirs. These are… things Luo Chengle must have seen in his mother, and he's assuming…

But Shen Yuan *is nowhere* near depressed.

He hears Chengle finally leave the room, apparently scolding some of the plush tigers for asking Luo Binghe for pets instead of him. Luo Binghe has no problem taking care of the boy for the next few minutes, and when he reappears in the hallway, his brows are furrowed only slightly in concern.

“Yuan-ge wants some tea with his breakfast?” he asks. Shen Yuan nods from where he lies, not quite sure he can find his own voice.

He stands there, lying on the sofa, one hand over his face, until a few minutes later he hears a simple: “Baba Yuan! Good morning!”

“Hey, honey!” Shen Yuan sits up with a smile, opening his arms for Chengle to jump in and hug him. Sure enough, the boy does. “Good morning, sweetie. Did you rest well?”

“It’s so late!” the boy protests, and Shen Yuan finds himself laughing despite everything. “I slept a lot. *A lot*. And I dreamed of tigers who had a secret kingdom where they *talked*! They were pet tigers to many princes in many places, and they told all their gossip there!”

“Wow,” Shen Yuan ruffles the boy’s hair and kisses his forehead with a calm smile. Truly, he can’t help but be fascinated by the child’s vast imagination. “That sounds wonderful. Maybe you can make a story out of it later?”

“Yes!” and Chengle becomes even more animated.

Luo Binghe seems to have been having a great time in the kitchen while they were both asleep. He's made youtiao with milk for Chengle, some fried buns filled with sweet beans,

and more. Shen Yuan sits in the best mood he can behind some soft wontons made of too-soft dough, accepting that at least it's *something* solid and, being food prepared by Luo Binghe, it could hardly be said to be bad, when he recalls:

“Oh, there will be some fireworks tonight… I think,” he says, looking out the window. The storm isn’t that big right now, just a really strong blizzard. “Weather permitting.”

“Fireworks?” Chengle’s eyes sparkle, huge and sweet. He has a cute milk mustache. “Like at festivals?”

Since it's December 31st, not many people in China have the cultural custom of celebrating the beginning of the Gregorian year. Still, it's much more common among younger people and foreign families to celebrate, even if it's just to enjoy the opportunity to drink and get together with friends.

Shen Yuan nods. He finds it a bit complicated to explain, but he tries anyway.

“Something like that,” he hesitates a little, his chopsticks in the air. “It’s celebrated something similar to the Lunar New Year. Only it’s… well, the last day of the foreign calendar. The one that governs this world, beyond customs. Starting tomorrow, a new year begins.”

Luo Chengle seems to be struggling to understand. After a moment, he simply asks, “So we’re going to have *two* New Years?”

Shen Yuan doesn't even contain the laughter that escapes him. "Sort of," he hums. "Let's just say this is the official New Year, and the other is the big traditional celebration."

“Will there be dragons?” the boy asks, propping himself up on his knees in the chair. His tender little eyes sparkle with stars. “And paper kites?! Will there be tanghua?!”

Shen Yuan slowly shakes his head. Chengle's pout dominates almost his entire face.

“No dragons or paper kites. But we can ask your father to make some tanghua,” he said, glancing at Luo Binghe, who nods so solemnly that Shen Yuan feels he’s asking for something very important. It’s a little funny. “And see some fireworks, if the weather improves.”

Shen Yuan puts down his chopsticks, gesturing with his hands as if he could imitate the bursts of fireworks. Chengle's expression is amazed and fascinated, even seeming on the verge of jumping out of his seat.

“I want to see them! I want to see them, Baba Yuan!”

Shen Yuan can't say no to those beautiful, bright eyes. Even so...

“Weather permitting,” he repeats, with a hint of caution in his voice. He can imagine the mess his sweet, spoiled boy will make if he doesn't see a single one in the vast expanse of the city. “If not, we can watch them on TV. They'll definitely be broadcasting them, and tomorrow morning, they'll be broadcasting all the ones from other countries.”

Chengle pouts so hard that it seems to stick needles in his heart.

"But…"

“We can watch them together, anyway. And that’s what matters,” Luo Binghe chimes in, calmly placing another plate on the table, clearly having listened attentively to the entire conversation. His fingers pause for a hesitant moment on Chengle’s shoulder before pulling away. “Besides, if there aren’t any fireworks outside, this Lord will make them happen.”

Shen Yuan gives him such a cold, stern look – the kind of look patented by his mother when one of her mischievous older sons was doing something so clearly wrong that it would end with one of them in the hospital or punished, and probably not in that order – that Luo Binghe stares at him with an expression that *pretends* to be innocent.

“Don’t even think about it,” he warns. The smile that plays on Luo Binghe’s face is a clear provocation.

Chengle, on the other hand, turns to look at Luo Binghe as if the father emperor who always infuriates him just promised him the moon and all the stars.

“Can Father Emperor make fireworks?” he asks, absolutely amazed.

“Your father can do a lot of dangerous things, that’s what he can do,” Shen Yuan mumbles, shoveling another wonton into his mouth just to stop himself from ranting further. He definitely *won’t let* Luo Binghe get within three meters of any modern fireworks, just out of caution.

Luo Binghe doesn't seem insulted in the least. He wears an almost arrogant smile as he places another plate on the breakfast table and a glass teacup that clearly shows not a single drop of blood staining the clear herbal mixture. Only after getting a nod from the now very excited boy does he take a seat. As he does so, Shen Yuan feels his chest unravel when Luo Binghe leans down to wipe the milk mustache off Chengle's little face with his own sleeve.

It’s a movement that Luo Chengle seems to take for granted and normal from all the times Shen Yuan has done it. However, Luo Binghe seems hesitant as he does it, careful with each movement, and when the boy goes on about how cool it would be if fireworks came in many colors and formed sea animals but in the sky without water and could look like they were flying, only then does Luo Binghe seem to relax enough in his seat to start eating breakfast.

Shen Yuan looks between the two of them. Luo Chengle seems to be bouncing in his seat, very excited, surrounded by fried crumbs. His little eyes sparkle as he starts asking a bunch of questions about what kind of fireworks his father emperor might create. And when Luo Binghe answers, it's really in a warm voice, gently rippling along with the boy's play, and Shen Yuan looks between them with such warmth creeping into his chest that he realizes it wasn't really just an exaggeration filled with tiredness and weariness from a long, emotional day.

Last night, he had told the truth. They are his family. His own family.

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Even if it isn't a “real” New Year like Luo Chengle is adamant about repeating (because what kind of New Year doesn't have dragons?... Shen Yuan is surprisingly okay with it, and while he doesn't want Chengle anywhere near any dragons, there are some that are surprisingly harmless to children and those with good intentions towards them and... well. Who would want to turn down a chance to see *dragons*?), Luo Binghe is adamant about wanting to make lots of traditional food.

Without Xin Mo at his immediate disposal, Shen Yuan finds himself having to bundle Chengle up in one of his warm jackets and snow boots, and they go out to buy various ingredients since Luo Binghe doesn't seem to trust choosing raw ones without checking their quality. It's not the best day for his muscles with the weather, but he's practically hanging on to the shopping cart as Luo Binghe goes from side to side, aisle to aisle, with an expression of utter amazement at the impossible amount of things. He goes slightly crazy examining the fruits (a large amount of spring and summer fruits when it's snowing outside is surely something that not even the markets in the Demon Realm could manage), obtains a quantity of vegetables much larger and of higher quality than Shen Yuan could have chosen on his own, and they finish their shopping with Luo Binghe taking almost five minutes to choose the perfect pieces of fish.

“Baba Yuan,” Chengle tugged on his sleeve, handing him a box of cereal. “Can we take some?”

“Sure, honey,” he hums, almost distractedly. “Put whatever you want in the cart.”

Which means that when he gets to the checkout line, half of it is a pile of fruits and vegetables, meats, fish, different types of grains and flours, and the other half is boxes of cereal, candy and snacks, dried sweet potato fries, rice cakes, sakura cookies, salted sunflower seeds, and mochi of all kinds and colors.

“What is this?” Luo Binghe asks, looking at one of the colorful boxes of mochi. Shen Yuan shrugs.

“It’s kind of like sweets,” he explains, returning the box to the cart. There aren’t many people at the checkout, but almost everyone has fairly full carts, making last-minute purchases for New Year dinners or else. “They have different flavors. This one is sweet bean, though my favorites are the berries. Maybe Chengle can share some with you to try.”

“No!” says Chengle, hopping onto the side of the cart. His high ponytail bounces with every jump. “They’re mine! Mine, mine! I don’t share!”

“Wouldn’t you share your Baba Yuan?” Shen Yuan asks, smiling at the boy. Chengle stands still, pouting.

“Yes,” he says, sighing dramatically. “But Baba Yuan can’t share them.”

“But my stomach hurts when I eat too much,” Shen Yuan continues to tease, and Chengle pouts even more, clearly guessing where this is going. “I could try a *little bit*. And what do I

do with the leftovers? We can't throw them away; it would be a waste."

"All right," Chengle says, his voice so tragic it's almost pitiful. "Father can have Baba Yuan's leftovers."

Luo Binghe's shoulders tremble with laughter beside him. Shen Yuan looks up at him only to find that radiant smile leaving him speechless and breathless.

"It wouldn't be a problem," Luo Binghe says gently. His voice lower when he said, "It would be an honor to have the leftovers that touched Yuan-ge's mouth."

Shen Yuan lets out a stifled groan, the heat hitting him almost physically.

"EWW!" Chengle says, jumping back up and down, clinging to the cart. "Bad Father! That's weird! Weird, weird! You lose points! Lose, lose, lose! TEN! Ten points below *zero*! You're going to lose!"

Two girls no older than teenagers standing in front of them in line are giggling softly, which is a stark contrast to the older couple ahead of them, staring in their direction with a look of displeasure, the old woman with a face as if she were smelling something rotten and the man with a grimace of almost disgust – Shen Yuan assumes because of how loud they're being, especially with Chengle bouncing and shrieking about points. What else could it possibly be? Obviously just the noise. Still, he buries his face in his hands, wishing more than ever he could turn into an ostrich and bury his head in the sand until Luo Binghe decides to be a normal person in public.

For the rest of the line, which thankfully is only about ten minutes, Luo Binghe and Chengle negotiate bitterly over points. Luo Binghe claims he's done a lot of things that deserve more points than he's earned so far, and Chengle has been unfair by giving them less. Chengle insists that he leave without warning caused him to lose a ton of points, and making Baba Yuan sad caused him to lose another ton. Shen Yuan can almost pretend he's not dying of embarrassment by the time they get to the checkout, starting to empty his cart to pay and leave. He's almost relieved when he pays with his phone, and they can finally get out of there and out of the way of all the stares in line.

"Baba Yuan!" Chengle runs, pulling on his hand as he hops between steps. "Can we play in the snow? In the park? Father *never* took me to the park," he says, giving Luo Binghe a dirty look. Shen Yuan takes an almost shaky step and sighs, shaking his head.

"Not today, baby, sorry," he hums. "Today is a bad day."

Luo Chengle understands this well. He doesn't insist even if he pouts a little. It's not the kind of pout that's meant to convince him to keep playing outside, but simply sad. They take a car to return even if it's just a few blocks, and it takes longer to pack and unpack the trunk altogether than it takes to get there, even with the streets slippery with ice.

As soon as they arrive, Shen Yuan puts on a movie for Chengle and goes to take the hottest bath his skin can tolerate to warm up and relieve some of the tension. It's not difficult to fall asleep on the sofa, wrapped in a blanket and wearing warm pajamas.

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Luo Binghe cooks. Shen Yuan wakes up almost an hour later, as the Treasure Planet movie is ending. After the movie ends, Chengle starts drawing lots of dragons and paper kites, and Shen Yuan only realizes what he's trying to do when he asks for his child's scissors, so Shen Yuan simply goes over to the coffee table to help him trim the edges, and soon, there are colorful dragons, painted paper kites, and paper fireworks all over the house.

In fact, Shen Yuan might keep some of the dragons. They're very adorable pieces of art.

Luo Binghe continues cooking. With a little help from his cane, Shen Yuan approaches to snoop around.

“It’s not necessary,” he insists, but Luo Binghe denies it.

“If Chengle wants two New Year’s, he’ll have two,” he says, and Shen Yuan finds himself laughing a bubbly laugh. It’s ridiculous, he thinks, but he still helps as much as he can, even if it’s washing the dishes Luo Binghe has been leaving out while he cooks.

Chengle appears when he's finished with some of his drawings and insists on filling dumplings, now struggling to close them like ingots. Then, with Luo Binghe working on a reduced orange sauce, steamed fish, longevity noodles and the dumpling filling, with Chengle filling the folds better and better with attentive little eyes and the tip of his tongue sticking out of his mouth in concentration, while Shen Yuan finishes washing and drying to make space and arrange so they can cook much better, he is surprised to think that in the new house they must have a much larger kitchen where the three of them can fit comfortably while cooking.

For some reason, the feeling that hits him after that—warm, *so warm* it drowns him, so overwhelming it makes his breath catch—is almost a vertigo that swings into panic too quickly, something so magnificent and beautiful that it scares him, and he can't even finish explaining why.

Chapter End Notes

LBH: I'm having too many feelings to do anything other than cling to Yuan-ge and hold him like I'm holding my whole world
SY: Ah, yeah, platonic familial hugs between co-parents of a child, normal, normal

I'm not crying, I just got a Chengle and Binghe bonding wholesome in my eye

Also, SY being watched by two homophobic old couple and just thinking they're bothered by the loud child. Honey. I think it's the first time his obliviousness saves him from a bad moment

My poor Chengle, traumatized by the people he loves becoming so sad that they forget to love him. Lucky Shen Yuan is CLEARLY not depressed :) god, what a jerk *shakes* would send you to therapy again, you dumb idiot, except you're already going and being pseudo-responsible about it. ANYWAY. ACCEPTANCE IS THE FIRST STEP. AND I KNOW IT'S HARD TO ACCEPT. BUT UGH
LBH, being threatened by a kind Yue Qi to make sure Xiao Yuan /goes/ to therapy without fail and without excuses... I'm glad it was Yue Qi and not Jiu-ge, I mean... yeah

This chapter made me research which countries start the new year first according to time zone..... and then decide I'd do the whole little family New Year's dinner thing for next chapter. Oh well. I don't really regret it. I saw some really nice fireworks in videos :D

LOOK SY, YOU'RE SO, SO CLOSE TO OPENING THAT CLOSET DOOR, JUST... CLOSE. SO, SO CLOSE *shakes* he'll fall out of the closet after ruling a secret kingdom for a few years. Or something like that. Seriously, this man just thinks "oh, how I love the family I'm creating" and just IGNORES all the subtext behind loving the father of his child and fuck he pisses me off sometimes. Dumb boy. I'll beat him with a stick

AAAAAA THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING!!! I HOPE YOU LIKED THE CHAPTER A LOT!! This chapter goes out to GayKitty with special affection just because was accompanied me (?) throughout the day, because simply started reading and commenting on the THREAD of the reading and it was very fun, sweet, and lovely. THANK YOU SO MUCH :'3 Oh, all of you really don't know the huge impact this (this trip, all of you, this fic) has on me, my mental health, and my life. I appreciate it SO MUCH. I LOVE YOU ALL SO MUCH.
ANYWAY, YOU KNOW!! I'M JUST A COMMENT-KUDO-INTERACTION AWAY TO HAVE FUN TOGETHER. ABSOLUTELY THANK YOU FOR READING AND COMMENTING. UNTIL NEXT FRIDAY!!!
SEE YOU SOON!! :3

Chapter 26: First days of a new year

Chapter Notes

CONGRATULATIONS, WE'VE COMPLETE THE CIRCLE!! I started writing this during a brutal manic episode, and now we're at the post-manic depression. Applause. I WILL try not to have any problems with updates, which will be easy for a few more chapters for now because I have a general structure, but maybe in about 4-5 chapters I will have to take another little break... I hope not
Anyway!!! Genuinely THANK YOU for all your wonderful support. You make everything about my day sparkle and make it worthwhile :'D

BTW, tomorrow is my birthday, congratulations are appreciated /hj

Chapter warnings: more self-stigma and internalized ableism. SY is as close to coming out as he is to accepting his depression. Neither seems on the horizon

Enjoy the chapter! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ShenY: [image]

ShenY: I'm sending a big bucket of fried chicken to your house. Among other things.

ShenY: Have a good old year, Airplane.

ShangHH: BRO????

ShangHH: MY SAVING HERO

ShangHH: YOU ARE THE BEST SUGAR DADDY IN THE WORLD

ShenY: I'm fucking canceling the order.

ShangHH: BROOOOO :(((((

ShenY: No, I won't cancel it.

ShenY: Behave yourself.

ShangHH: thanks daddy i promise i'll be a good boy

ShangHH: woof woof

ShenY: I will test the realism of Shen Qingqiu's dismemberment with you.

ShenY: And I won't need Luo Binghe to help me with it.

ShangHH: UNDERSTAND BYE BRO TAKE CARE SEE YOU NEXT YEAR

Shen Yuan sighs. The weather hasn't improved at all, but it hasn't worsened either. The news reports that even though visibility is low, the most popular fireworks displays are still going ahead with their plans. Shen Yuan isn't too sure visibility will allow them to see the big thing from the windows either, but given the central location, he has some hope.

It's not even eight o'clock in the evening when Luo Binghe begins arranging the dishes on the coffee table. Shen Yuan, after a day of pain is half-sits on the floor on cushions, preparing to eat while the fireworks are broadcast. It's already New Year's in Kiribati, New Zealand, and soon in Fiji, and Chengle is watching the enormous light shows, fireworks, drones, and the like with an expression of hallucinated amazement.

Shen Yuan is enjoying a couple of soft dumplings, some broth, and is definitely laughing his head off when Chengle begins to have a tough battle with the longevity noodles to eat them whole, in which the noodles seem to win. Luckily, his little boy is quite stubborn, which helps him win against the noodles, even if his face ends up splattered with sauce.

Shen Yuan tries a small portion of the steamed fish, which turns out to be absolutely delicious. Luo Binghe eats a little here and there, but from his expression, Shen Yuan can assume that he seems much happier watching others eat their meals than actually eating them. He surmises that he must have grown accustomed to the exquisite taste by now—of course, he wouldn't be surprised by his own cooking. Still, Shen Yuan enjoys the tender food bite by bite, laughing while Chengle wants to push food onto his plate for him to taste when he sees Luo Binghe doing the same in a manner that is trying to be discreet.

The New Year arrives in New Zealand with a massive display of fireworks, drones, and lights in the skies that look like dancing stars. Luo Binghe switches dishes, Chengle starts to get a little restless in anticipation, and by the time the New Year's arrival is broadcast in Sydney, Luo Binghe appears with dragon-patterned tanghua that makes Chengle squeal and bounce on his pillow. Shen Yuan tastes just a tiny bit, letting his precious boy fill his hands and mouth with sugar.

He takes a huge pile of pictures of *everything*. He sends some to the family group, others directly to his mother. There are also a few pics in the family group: his parents are at a hotel with a buffet, where they're having dinner and sharing some visibly expensive wine; Jiu-ge and Yue-ge are apparently at a posh-looking restaurant with low lighting, sharing colorful drinks and a light meal; and Meimei even sends a couple of pics with her friends celebrating at her apartment, having already uncorked some champagne and sparkling wine.

If Shen Yuan knows Ming-ge well, he's sure he's been asleep since eight o'clock, which was when he last responded with a thumbs-up to his mother's text wishing them a good night. The pic he'd sent of his own large sushi order even had a glimpse of the hem of his pajamas.

Shen Yuan finds himself nearly drunk without a drop of alcohol, simply numb from the idea his head seems to hold and not let go. Just as his parents created their family, as Jiu-ge created his own with his best friend and his cat, Shen Yuan feels as if he can freeze that moment, hold it tight and close, and feel like it's the moment where his own little family began.

In fact, he *can.*

“Binghe,” he calls, and he looks at him with a gentle expression. “Your arms are longer. Here, hold the phone there… Chengle, here, here!”

They take a lot of selfies. Even Shen Yuan forces himself to smile and pose, and when he looks back at the photos, he actually *doesn't look like* the kind of plastic, awkward smile he usually has in family photos, tense moments of forced smiles and trying not to look overwhelmed. Shen Yuan meets his own smile like a stranger, happier than he thinks he's seen himself in a long time.

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Luo Chengle usually falls asleep no later than ten o'clock. It being ten past ten, the boy insisted on staying up until the fireworks, unhappy with just watching broadcasts from other countries, and Shen Yuan had to call upon his ‘new child in house’ entertainment resources, provided by forum tips during his first week of fostering a child: the great benefit of now being three people for a skillful and dynamic game of UNO.

The rules are absolutely easy to explain, and by the time Luo Binghe and Chengle fully grasp what the game is about, Shen Yuan is playing normally, discarding cards from his deck while father and son start throwing card after card back and forth, trying to grab +2, +4, overlapping, practically attacking each other at every opportunity. When Shen Yuan accidentally grabs a few cards from the deck, Chengle’s eyes are sad – clearly thinking that he would have some cards to defend himself with and make Luo Binghe grab double.

Shen Yuan does indeed have it, but he's not willing to make Luo Binghe grab more than twelve cards. Seriously. He may not be afraid of the man, not after all this, but there are old habits Shen Yuan won't budge from.

Luo Binghe brings to him a milk tea and a warm milk for Luo Chengle at ten to eleven. Chengle has already begun to yawn, stretching, nodding off, and dozing off in fits and starts. After watching the honestly magnificent fireworks and drone display as the New Year arrives in Tokyo, Shen Yuan sends his child off to change into pajamas and brush his teeth, and allows a boy a nap in his arms with the pinky promise of waking him up to watch the fireworks. The weather has improved only slightly, a minor thing, but at least Shen Yuan thinks they'll be able to see a few.

So Shen Yuan finds himself with his arms full of a sleeping child and his pet stuffed tiger, grateful when Luo Binghe, with a pleased expression, brings the half-empty cup of milk tea to his mouth to help him drink it.

“Yuan-ge likes this,” Luo Binghe says after a while. Shen Yuan hums.

“Tea? Sure, it’s good,” he shrugs. Luo Binghe laughs.

“This,” he points to Chengle, to the room filled with drawings, cards, toys, dishes still not completely cleared, the empty two-handled milk cup with a drawing of an angry duck. “Having a child.”

“Yes,” Shen Yuan surprises himself by answering, but the truth is… he likes it. He really likes it. “I like it. I never thought I could have…” and actually, it’s not a lie. He never imagined himself with a child, just as he never imagined himself married, with a relationship, or living past the age of twenty. He never imagined that one day the space he inhabits would feel comfortable in a familiar mess that wasn’t just dirt and scraps of cheap food. That he would care about his diet, about getting proper rest, about doing something more than just suffering and grieving over his pain. That he’s made it to twenty-five is a true miracle. “… none of this.”

“Yuan-ge is young,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan snorts with laughter. He’s a young man with the ailing body of an old man. “Even without Chengle, he could get married. Have children. A family.”

“*I already have* a family,” he says to Luo Binghe, looking at him with a raised eyebrow. Still, there’s no malice in Luo Binghe’s tone of voice, only a kind of strange curiosity. “I guess it’s not traditional or the way the people would… expect. But I have a son,” and Chengle is a precious little thing asleep in his arms, his breathing deep and slow, his mouth half-open, using Shen Yuan as a living pillow while he hugs the big Dawang Tiger. “And I have you,” he murmurs, not even daring to look up. He still finds the concept of his son having two fathers a bit too… open to misinterpretation for his liking. “I have a family.”

“Is this all Yuan-ge wants?” Luo Binghe asks. His voice is low; Shen Yuan wants to be defensive, because something about his question doesn’t quite suit him. Still, the way Luo Binghe speaks is almost gentle. It seems to be genuine interest without any prejudice. “A small life with a small family?”

Shen Yuan exhales softly.

“It’s more than I ever thought I’d have,” he says simply. He lowers his voice slightly, trying not to disturb Chengle’s dreams. “I thought I’d die before I was twenty. Every day since then is a gift,” and he can’t help it when he kisses Chengle’s forehead. The boy, even asleep, seems to recognize the gentle touch, because he smiles in his sleep. If it weren’t for how heavy he is in his arms and how deep and regular his breathing is, Shen Yuan would think he’s feigning sleep. Besides, Luo Binghe has made sure that *if* he gets any sleep, “Chengle is a gift for me. This small life with this small family is a gift. Every day, every meal, every moment I’m not in pain, every moment the pain isn’t unbearable, every happy moment… is a gift.”

He struggles not to get emotional. He hates talking about emotions, feelings, *everything*. He's honestly too familiar with the fact that talking about emotions involves surgeries or goodbyes to do it in a good way. In fact, Shen Yuan can't remember the last time he voluntarily talked about what he feels in a situation that didn't involve shouting and fighting.

Ah, well, he supposes Dr. Jun's ridiculous homework has some function, then?

“I know it’s not much,” he hums, a little amused. What does he have in his small life compared to the achievements, conquests, battles, and treasures of a Demon Emperor? Shen Yuan is satisfied with just having food on the table, entertainment, and now, Chengle being happy. “But I never… asked for much. Now I have more than enough.”

“It shouldn’t be just *enough*,” Luo Binghe says, his voice almost protesting. Shen Yuan turns his head to look at him, his expression focused. There’s a wrinkle between his brows that makes him look adorable. “It should be perfect.”

Shen Yuan sighs. He shakes his head.

“Nothing is perfect, Binghe,” he hums, though he actually thinks it could be. He thinks it could be perfect if only he could make sure Luo Chengle had every single thing he ever wanted. If he could run after him in the snow, if he could play rough by tickling him and carrying him around, if he could play Just Dance with him, if he didn’t need breaks from something as simple as a walk by his side. It *could* be perfect, if not for… himself. “Things are never perfect, no matter how good they are. But there are perfect moments,” and cherishing Chengle in his arms, Shen Yuan is certain he’s living one. “And I do have many of those.”

Luo Chengle, in his arms, lets out a tiny nasal snort. Shen Yuan is extremely amused, unable to understand how this moment could be anything other than perfect, wishing to lock him in a bubble and live there forever.

Luo Binghe doesn't say anything else for a long time after that, though he seems to fiddle with his phone nervously as always when he has it, still not quite understanding how to use it. He hands Shen Yuan more tea and he drinks it carefully until it's ten to twelve, and the two of them carefully wake Chengle up, who yawns and squirms for a full five minutes until Shen Yuan starts tickling him and the boy squeals, finally waking up just in time.

It's Luo Binghe who turns off the lights, and Shen Yuan settles down, wrapped in a blanket, by the large window, hugging Chengle. Luo Binghe moves a little to one side, but Shen Yuan tugs on his sleeve, causing him to move closer to them so that Chengle is right in the middle, trapped. Shen Yuan assumes it's because Chengle is still sleepy that he doesn't complain, relaxing between them until the exact moment that midnight strikes and the fireworks begin.

It's true that visibility is pretty poor, but the fireworks are still visible. Chengle is almost pressing his cute, excited face against the window, and Shen Yuan couldn't be happier with his bright smile. Being in the downtown area, the skies are small and seem to blaze with colors that scorch their way through the clouds, and Chengle is so excited watching it all that Shen Yuan thinks it'll be hard for him to go back to sleep.

It isn't, really. When the show ends, Chengle chatters a little about how nice it all was, watches other broadcasts on the TV screen, and before Shen Yuan has time to worry about how he might ruin Chengle's sleep schedule, the boy is already snoring on the carpet, cuddling with a stuffed tiger that licks the loose strands of his ponytail as if looking to groom him.

“Well, you’ll have to carry him,” he says to Luo Binghe. He scrambles to his feet as Luo Binghe carries the sleeping child—plus a stuffed tiger—to the bed, doing some awkward stretches so his muscles don’t get beat up after being forced to stay on the floor for so long. Like many things, the sweet smile on his baby’s face is definitely worth the pain.

He tidies up a bit, arranging the plates with some mochi and fries, and also putting the card game back in its box. He's finishing putting the cushions back on the sofa when Luo Binghe returns.

“Yuan-ge shouldn’t be overexerting himself,” he protests, quickly finishing clearing the table. Shen Yuan wasn’t planning on continuing to overexert himself, so he enjoys slumping on the sofa until Luo Binghe returns to continue cleaning.

“I’m not,” he says mockingly, and Luo Binghe’s smile is so radiant that it seems to light up the entire room, far from the mockery in his voice.

“Fine,” Luo Binghe says, sounding ridiculously smug. “Yuan-ge should always be relaxed.”

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Well, it's not like he's actually done much of anything, to be honest… He's barely done anything, but he still leans back on the side of the sofa, more lying down than sitting, watching Luo Binghe come and go. When he hears Luo Binghe start washing up in the kitchen, Shen Yuan takes out his phone to check. He has a silly greeting from Airplane that he's responding to, and also a few other messages from his family. Even Jiu-ge (probably Yue Qi on his phone) has sent him a greeting. Shen Yuan answers a bit, looks through his photos, and chooses one from that night where the three of them are together with the TV full of fireworks and a bunch of delicious food to use as his wallpaper. It's a good picture, he tells himself. The smiles on the three of them are… an amazing thing, honestly.

It's truly capturing a perfect moment. Even in moments like that, Shen Yuan is content with what he has.

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The first day of the year is a day like any other with a light breakfast after the big dinner, medicines, ointments, massages, with the small difference that after lunch he receive a visit from his parents, and Shen Yuan has to run as fast as his dumb body can to remove all the talismans from the backs of stuffed tigers and hide them in his desk drawer to prevent his parents from being scared by moving stuffed tigers.

Luo Binghe looks at him with a raised eyebrow.

“In my world,” he explains, his heart still racing from trying to hide everything discreetly *and* in time, “it’s… a little terrifying when inanimate things move without any explanation.”

Then, Luo Binghe smiles with clear sarcasm as he says, “Oh, of course. In this Lord’s world as well.”

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes but laughs. He also hides all the little wooden toys in a different drawer.

For his parents, any excuse is a good one to give gifts, especially for his mother. She seems to take great pride in giving her grandson "the first gift of the year," and Chengle is extremely happy unwrapping *another* stuffed tiger for his immense collection, this one white. She also gives him a box of colorful-chocolate candies, telling him to eat *in moderation*, and Shen Yuan can tell that if he doesn't take it away soon, it won't last the rest of the day.

No one looks at Luo Binghe unkindly. Even his mother seems to like him *a little* more now, greeting him, asking him questions, and including him in conversation. His father continues to look at him suspiciously, but Shen Yuan distracts him long enough with pics of Chengle and some of his drawings until the two decide to leave a while later.

After putting all the talismans back on his tigers and welcoming the new little white tiger with a talisman into the pack (it's funny, and Shen Yuan can't help but wonder how exactly these talismans work, because it's true that all the stuffed animals behave just like the animal they represent. Are they just puppeteering movements, though, or is it like they have some sort of consciousness of their own? For these stuffed tigers, does having their talismans removed make them feel something similar to simply falling asleep? …it's not like Shen Yuan is going to have any answers, really, so he doesn't worry too much), Chengle starts drawing for all his tigers, and it's only when Shen Yuan is tidying up the boy's drawings later that he notices one with a smile so big it hurts.

"Look," he calls out to Luo Binghe, waving a drawing in his direction. The burst of happiness this produces is irrational to say the least. "You're here."

Luo Binghe is easily recognizable. He's a still very large figure with a huge head next to Chengle and Shen Yuan, the three of them together under a great pile of fireworks. It's a messy, colorful drawing, as if Chengle still doesn't understand how to feel about it, with slightly messier and fiercer scratches on Luo Binghe's hair and clothes, but there they are, all *three of them.*

Shen Yuan can feel nothing but happiness. For that little boy, so afraid of his great and foolish Father Emperor, there seems to be little left of his fear, and for a child who was able to use a great evil sword to flee from him… Shen Yuan can only feel that even a little bit, it is a huge progress for him.

Luo Binghe didn't respond immediately. He holds the drawing so carefully he could be holding butterfly wings, and Shen Yuan bites the inside of his cheek, leaving the great Luo Binghe to reduce himself to emotions and overly shaky breaths as he stares at that small piece of paper filled with the colors and love of a happy child.

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When the next day arrives and it's time for therapy, Shen Yuan shows up ten minutes early to greet Snow and White, and *manages* to have a brief conversation with A-Zhu, the friendly receptionist, who offers to let him wait for their next session so he can watch him feed them frozen mice before Dr. Jun comes out, welcoming him back to his office.

“Welcome back,” Dr. Jun greets, taking a seat on his big couch. Shen Yuan notices he’s moved the armchair he used last session a little closer, and sighs, settling in. It’s still as comfortable as he remembered. “How was your week?”

Shen Yuan deploys his secret weapon: a ridiculously small, easily concealable notebook in his pocket, where he's written all his homework notes, and lays it out on the table, proud of himself. During his time at school, he'd never left any homework undone, and a therapy homework wasn't going to be any different.

“Normal,” he says, allowing Dr. Jun to open his notebook. He sees his mouth twitch into a smile as he begins to read, snooping through everything. Shen Yuan has tried to be diligent enough or at least following what Dr. Jun had asked him to do: jot down what simple activities are part of his daily life, and even more so, what kinds of emotions, sensations, or things in general are part of his routine along with his activities.

A quick reread had told him it had been a tiring week—at least half of it involved extreme tiredness. Still, oh well. Excuse him for having so much pain and stuffing xianxia herbs into his body! Even if he trusted whatever Mu Qingfang had prescribed, *he was* pretty tired already without any of those herbs that might or might not help him. He hadn't had a particularly big bad day since he'd been taking them, but then again, he hadn't pushed himself so hard that he'd had such a bad day either…

Besides, it had been a *happy week.* Discounting the fact that Luo Binghe had been away for part of the week, and that had been… not happy. But he had taken Chengle to the park, and they had played together, he had made small talk with Airplane, he had made more plans for their move and decorations with Chengle, and he had… done a lot of things with the child. And it was all too happy with him, because how could it not be?

Dr. Jun reads all the pages fairly quickly. His eyebrows make strange expressions on the day —Shen Yuan knows exactly which day. He had considered lying, but honestly, what good would lying do him in therapy? He wasn't paying to lie to someone's face. So, he had been… honest enough. Luo Binghe had left suddenly, and Shen Yuan had been like a crazy man walking off into the walls because it had been… unexpected and fucked up. And *horrible*. And he was furious and melodramatically tired.

In the end, he passes the notebook back across the table to Shen Yuan and opens his own notebook, fiddling with his damn pen with its ridiculous red pompom.

“Well, I must congratulate you. It’s not always easy to reduce a whole week’s routine into a couple of pages,” Dr. Jun hums, absentmindedly making some notes in his notebook. “I just have a couple of questions for you now, if you don’t mind.”

Shen Yuan leans slightly to one side, leaning on the armrest of the comfortable armchair.

“I'm here,” he says, shrugging. “You can ask me anything. For the next 40 minutes, I think.”

Dr. Jun smiles almost playfully.

“Good,” he says. He fiddles with the pen in his hand, and Shen Yuan forces himself not to look at the ridiculous pompom. “More than a question, I’d like to notice something in particular. And to know if you’ve noticed it personally.”

Shen Yuan exhales. He rests his head on his hand, looking at him.

“It’s true that your routine has many happy moments,” Dr. Jun hums, pointing at Shen Yuan’s closed notebook on the coffee table. “They’re precious moments, of course, and it’s a great joy that you have them. Really. In this life, it’s *hard* to find things that make us happy, isn’t it?” And Dr. Jun smiles, a little more genuine than mocking this time. Shen Yuan nods absentmindedly. “Could you tell me what you remember as the happiest part of your week?”

Shen Yuan doesn't even hesitate: "Well, the New Year's preparations with Chengle. More than the New Year itself, the... doing everything beforehand," he shrugs. It had been a particularly happy day, compared to others. "It was the happiest thing of the week."

Dr. Jun hums. He scribbles something else in his notebook.

“And the second happiest thing?”

“The park?” He hesitated for a moment. He had been extremely happy even with Jiu-ge’s scolding. “I guess I’ll take Chengle to the park and then have lunch with my brother.”

Dr. Jun nods. This time he doesn't jot anything down in his notebook, but his expression seems to make Shen Yuan come up with something. Shen Yuan, honestly, doesn't have much of an idea what he wants him to notice. Has it been a happy week? Except for the unhappy parts, but honestly, who could blame him? He has to hold on to the good moments he has. Paying too much attention to the bad has never done him any good.

He asks a couple more questions; Shen Yuan isn't sure he knows how to list happy moments in order of which was happier than others, but it's not that complicated. They are particular, comfortable moments, far from feeling exhausted, or overwhelmed, or simply... too tired.

“So,” Dr. Jun points to his poor little notebook on the table with his pen. “Do you notice the pattern of happiness this week?”

“I don’t get tired when that happens?” he says, somewhat jokingly. Dr. Jun smiles with an almost mocking smirk.

“Also,” he says. “I mean the exact *pattern.* Who are you with when you’re happy?”

“With Chengle?” Shen Yuan hesitates a little, at a loss. What is Dr. Jun supposed to be getting at with this anyway? “Well, he’s my son. I’m obviously happy with him.”

“And who else?” Dr. Jun insists. Shen Yuan feels that uncomfortable feeling that his intense expression creates in him again, wanting to jump away and run away. But he won’t. Not yet, at least.

“With my brother?” he hesitates. Then: “With Chengle’s father?”

“Who *aren’t you with* when you’re happy?” Dr. Jun asks finally. His smile even leaves his face, and Shen Yuan feels an uncomfortable shiver. He’s not too sure he follows. “Of all the people in your life. Who among them *aren’t* you with when you’re happy?”

“That…” Shen Yuan shakes his head. “I didn’t really see much of my family this week, but that’s *usually* the case. I’m happy with them, actually…”

“I’m not saying that,” says Dr. Jun, his voice bordering on diplomatic. Shen Yuan notices how tense he’s become only when Dr. Jun changes his tone of voice, as if sensing that he’s more likely to jump out the window than continue the session. “Let me put it this way: During all the happy moments of your week, have you had a single happy moment just in *your own* company?”

Shen Yuan opens his mouth, extremely ready to say that it's ridiculous—how could he *not* have a happy moment in his own company, if he was in his head all the time anyway? If he was with himself when he played with Chengle, when he washed the dishes while father and son cooked, when he looked for apartments, when he chatted with Airplane, when he ate with his brother…

Not a single word comes out of his mouth.

Dr. Jun's smile returns to his mouth. It's not *as* creepy this time.

“Your moments of happiness this past week, at least, revolve around being with others. Not one of them belongs solely to you,” and it’s strange how Dr. Jun can say that with such a solemn expression and at the same time, with his eyebrows doing something ridiculous on his face. “Do you have any idea what that means?”

“That am I a sociable flower?” Shen Yuan asks, just for the sake of it. He feels a nervous smile creeping onto his face. Well, Shen Yuan has always considered himself an introvert, but it’s true that he finds it easier to be in the company of other people, even if he doesn’t exactly agree with being visited or visiting others. When there were other people around, it was easier to… get distracted. Get distracted from himself.

Fuck.

Dr. Jun's expression is unfazed by even his attempt at ridiculous humor.

“It's a repeating pattern,” Dr. Jun continues. “Your happiness is tied to being *something* for others. A parent, a friend, a sibling, a son. You *do* and *are* for others, and that brings you happiness, which is valid and not at all negligible. But when you're alone, who are you? What makes you happy?”

Shen Yuan doesn't even make the effort to open his mouth to answer.

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Shen Yuan doesn't want to do something melodramatic like coming home from therapy and locking himself in his room feeling bad about himself, so he does exactly the same thing but

in a functional version and without so many questions: he looks for clean clothes and gets into a bath so hot and long that it ends with his skin reddened and sensitive, and his fingers wrinkled.

It's only when he's towel-drying his hair, staring at the floor, that he allows himself to sulk and get angry. *Damn*. He's a *normal* person. So *what's wrong* with the happiest moments of his day-to-day life being with Chengle? Yes, it's true that before him... there wasn't much. He read PIDW, played games sometimes, ate junk food delivery, spent more time doing nothing and sleeping than having a productive life. So what? *So what?* More people with his terrible living conditions had... worse times!

No, he didn't have any friends, he wasn't going to apologize for not wanting to drag anyone into his black hole of making excuses because he couldn't get out or stopping them from following a proper rhythm. In fact, it was a relief! A huge and utter *relief*! No friends to force, no burden to anyone!

Yes, Shen Yuan may not have the most… exactly happy life. He *knows* that. He *knows that*. But it doesn't mean… it doesn't mean he's sad. *Sad.* He's not sad. He's upset. Angry. Distraught, sometimes. Why is it supposed to be positive to get all that up high? It's better down low, like something he doesn't even have to look at closely!

He has happy moments. Many more now. Shen Yuan… is fine with that. And *yes,* he can have happy moments with himself, he has! Reading PIDW, and playing games, and… and arguing on forums! Many *happy moments* where he just ranted about the daily stupidity of that damn novel's plot and…!

Shen Yuan forces himself to take a deep breath, hyperaware that the dizziness he's feeling is because he's hyperventilating. He's still sitting in his chair, water dripping from his hair, his hands shaking as he holds the towel, dripping from his hair and running all over his face. Even his eyes feel wet.

"Yuan-ge?" Shen Yuan jumps when he hears a knock at the door. His heart thuds fiercely against his throat. "Yuan-ge has been in the bathroom for a long time. Is he okay? Do… you need help?"

Shen Yuan opens his mouth to reply when he realizes he can't speak. It's as if his voice is stuck in his throat, unable to say anything like 'I'm fine' or 'don't worry.' He wants to, he definitely wants to be able to say it, but the harder he tries, the more he realizes he won't even be able to make a sound.

So pathetic.

"Yuan-ge," Luo Binghe insists just a little longer. He knocks once more, and then just: "I'm going in."

Shen Yuan has to be thankful he didn't lock the door. He doesn't know how he could explain that he accidentally broke the bathroom lock, but Luo Binghe doesn't break it, and when he enters, Shen Yuan finds it hard to even hold his gaze.

“Are you feeling bad?” Luo Binghe asks, with a gentleness that hits him even harder than a slap. Shen Yuan can feel some anger beginning to scrape at the edges, but too much exhaustion to convey it. “Do you need help?”

Shen Yuan shakes his head. Then, he nods, and with a trembling hand, he points to his throat and then shakes his finger. He's absolutely certain that Luo Binghe won't be able to understand him if he tries to sign in the air, which is fine, because he has no idea how many times Shen Yuan has simply learned other ways to communicate in lieu of being able to use his own words or his own voice.

“Yuan-ge has no voice,” Luo Binghe correctly guesses. When he nods, Luo Binghe takes a step into the bathroom. “Is there any medicine…?”

Shen Yuan shakes his head. He reaches for his cane, ready to stand up and leave the bathroom in one fell swoop but realizes it's not there. He actually has no idea where he left his cane. He's sure he came into the house with it, at least, so he can only assume he left it lying somewhere in the room in his haste to lock himself in the bathroom.

Luo Binghe doesn't offer help. Shen Yuan supposes it's for the best when Luo Binghe steps forward, holding out his arm for Shen Yuan to use for support. It's even firmer than his own cane, and helps him stand firmly, even more so for the first few steps out of the bathroom. His hair is still dripping wet, and he can feel the drops hitting his face, his cheeks, sliding too salty from the corner of his mouth.

Luo Binghe helps him into his room. Chengle is drawing in the living room, and after greeting and hugging him when he arrives, he hasn't insisted they play together, which Shen Yuan assumes is better; at least, he hasn't seen it... not like this. *Not* like this.

Luo Binghe takes his role as human cane seriously: he helps him into bed, brings him a blanket, replaces the wet towel with a dry one, and helps him dry his hair. That's fine, Shen Yuan thinks, feeling himself hover just a little above his body, forcing himself to take deep breaths, forcing the droplets splashing his face to stop being such a nuisance. Luo Binghe doesn't make a sound or ask any questions, which is also fine, as he dries his hair. His own short, straight hair is much easier to dry, so it takes virtually no time at all.

“I’ll make some tea for Yuan-ge. Something warm will do your throat good,” Luo Binghe says, carrying the towels in his arms. “Yuan-ge should rest for a moment.”

Shen Yuan nods. He curls up against a pillow, taking deep breaths. It feels like a moment between a second and an eternity has passed when Luo Binghe leaves the room and a little head peeks around the door. Shen Yuan, despite feeling his body stiff and tense, reaches out his arm for Luo Chengle to run and throw himself into a hug. The boy runs and climbs onto the bed, hugging Shen Yuan tightly that it's slightly painful.

“Is Baba Yuan feeling very, very bad today?” the boy asks. He pouts sadly, and Shen Yuan shakes his head, pointing to his throat and denying it. The boy nods.

Shen Yuan smiles, feeling at peace that he just…understands. He pulls Chengle closer, rocking him in a tight embrace. He feels… just a little better now. Not so exhausted. Chengle

snuggles into his arms, almost as if seeking to make himself smaller in his embrace, and Shen Yuan doesn't mind as he holds him tight, awash in the scent of his curls, the warmth of his little body making him aware of how cold he is.

Maybe that's all it is. Maybe he just got too cold. Actually, it's more than likely. He's about to get sick, and that's why he feels so... ridiculously bad. A little less suffocated by this new and obvious revelation, Shen Yuan sits down less wobbly when Luo Binghe arrives with a cup of hot tea—as always, using clear cups. It's a great relief to see that he's not giving him all these blood parasites. When he takes a couple of gulps, he realizes that, with Luo Binghe sitting next to him and Chengle practically climbing onto his lap, he actually does feel much better.

"I think it's better now," he says. His voice is raspy around the edges, still a little low. Then he turns to Chengle, with a small smile: "I left a child doing homework when I left. Are you finished?"

"Yes!" Chengle jumps out of bed, clearly excited. "Father Emperor helped!"

"Oh, really?" Shen Yuan glances at Luo Binghe, who has a small, peaceful smile. "Then bring your books. We'll see how it goes."

Chengle runs to get his things. Shen Yuan sighs, feeling as if a huge weight has been lifted from him with that sigh. Luo Binghe's hand had once rested on his back, and it remains there, a pounding warmth spreading down his spine.

"This Lord is unaware of the demons in Yuan-ge's heart," Luo Binghe says, his voice so low and so close to Shen Yuan's ear that it sends a chill down his spine. "But Yuan-ge… he's been doing well, up until now. But he doesn't have to continue doing it alone."

Shen Yuan exhales, and his exhalation feels almost like a sigh. Doing it alone, doing it well, bah. Heart demons, really? Yet when he looks up and sees Luo Binghe's expression, it feels almost physically impossible to tell him not to worry, that everything will be okay, that he is okay. When he opens his mouth to speak, all that comes out is a simple, "Thank you."

Luo Binghe has a tiny smile. Shen Yuan feels like he could sink into it.

When Luo Chengle walks back with his completed activity booklet to the page Shen Yuan pointed out, climbing between the two of them to show off all the things he did and explain where he should have asked his Father Emperor for help (which, surprisingly, was quite a few at one point. Shen Yuan was almost certain that Chengle could have done it on his own, but he was just basking in Luo Binghe's attention like any child basks in their father's attention). And Shen Yuan is humming, checking that everything is correct, pointing out places where something doesn't look quite right or where he should redo it with corrections.

Little by little, he feels a little better, like the slow effect of a painkiller but directly to his heart. His throat doesn't tighten when he speaks, and his own mouth smiles without Shen Yuan putting much effort into it. Well, right now, what does it matter if he's not happy being in his own company, or his own head? What does it matter if he doesn't remember the last time he felt happy alone, when the company of others didn't distract him from his own crippling sadness? What does it matter if he doesn't remember what it felt like to do

something that made him feel fulfilled, happy, and satisfied without other people involved around him?

Shen Yuan has his family now. His little family, and with them, thanks to them, Shen Yuan is happier than he's ever been.

For now, Shen Yuan supposes, it should be enough.

Chapter End Notes

LBH: Okay, I'll ask if he hasn't thought about having more children...
SY: I ALREADY HAVE A FAMILY, I'M PERFECT AS I AM RIGHT NOW
LBH: ...is that a no? :(

SY: I'M NOT DEPRESSED
SY: ...maybe I'm a LITTLE BIT sad...
Me, frustrated author: YES, AND YOU'RE ALSO A LITTLE BIT HOMOSE-

Can you believe I took advantage of my biweekly appointment with my therapist to ASK HER if Dr. Daddy TLJ's dialogue was coherent within a therapeutic space and typical approach to first sessions? The answer she gave me was: yes, in fact, it's usual to try to get the patient to understand their own mental and emotional state in order to address it in a first-person realization in subsequent sessions, helping them understand and recognize the mental space they inhabit and their own emotions regarding themselves, and to find where the emotional issues to be addressed lie

Crumbs of platonic cumplane..... crumbs.....

It gave me too much laughter and cuteness LBH subtly asking SY if he saw himself having more children in a few years and receiving a clear and direct "no, haha lol" because SY definitely didn't understand his question and got defensive, thinking LBH was making him look less like a father. Oh, silly boy *squeezes him* you really are a funny little poor thing to deal with

Chengle is a baby who is getting more and more comfortable and happy in that "small life," so comfortable and happy that he's even accepting his big bad Father Emperor as a part of his life :'3 BABIES ARE BONDING, I'M CRYING, HE'S REALLY TOO SPECIAL FOR ME. It only took a month-long disappearance and long weeks of arduous and humiliating effort on LBH's part to get even a BIT of a MINIMAL acceptance from Chengle... little by little, big guy :P

Ah, the good Qijiu friends who go to restaurants. In the dim light where they serve colorful cocktails to celebrate the new year, totally platonic, surely :D Point for the qijiu who never let the camaraderie die and go on platonic romantic dates

DAMN GUYS, I HOPE YOU LIKED THE CHAPTER!!! We're getting closer to the milestone!! Will SY come out of the gay closet or accept that he has depression first? Bets are in. HEHEHEHEHE
THANK YOU SO MUCH AS ALWAYS FOR ALL YOUR SUPPORT. YOU HAVE ME SPEECHLESS AND FULL OF LOVE. Seriously, REALLY, you mean SO MUCH to me!!!! I want to hug you, grant all your wishes, and get us a house in the mountains with a garden where we can have a great picnic. THANK YOU SO MUCH for making these gray days beautiful for me :'3
OK, YOU KNOW!!! KUDO-COMMENT-INTERACTION, LET'S HAVE FUN TOGETHER!!!
SEE YOU SOON! ;D

Chapter 27: First glimpses of a new home

Chapter Notes

> HEY, THANK YOU EVERYONE FOR ALL THE LOVELY BIRTHDAY WISHES!!!! Please know that I ate sushi, slept a lot with my cat (she purred a lot), and it was actually a better day than I thought it could have been, so I appreciate it SO MUCH :'D ...honestly, I was going to post this chapter yesterday (happy BELATED birthday to our boy Shen Qingqiu!!!) but I didn't have the energy to edit it. ANYWAY, this week's schedule: Monday-Thursday-Sunday. I'm operating week by week (almost day by day), we'll see how next week goes, and for now, let's focus on this one :D
>
> Chapter warnings: general chronic pain. Internalized ableism (but steps are being taken!! We're all very proud of our boy!!!!)
>
> Enjoy the chapter!! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Of course, a new, unfurnished apartment is a completely different thing from the visual cozy image presented on the website. Shen Yuan is only too sure of that.

However, seeing the bare walls, everything too white, is… well. *Uninviting*. There's not a single piece of furniture, just rigid wooden floors in every direction, white walls (no, off-white? Cream? Although it's a cooler shade that he doesn't quite like), and lights that… also don't look quite right.

“I don’t know,” he says. The friendly real state agent has a salesman’s smile, an expression that looks almost uncomfortably desperate. Shen Yuan is certain he’s earning on commission, and if Shen Yuan makes the move the man expects, he figures it would start the year off on the right foot for the agent. “It looks… very white.”

“A good painting always gives the look of home,” the agent says almost immediately. He has a suit that fits snugly, more like a size smaller than elegantly fitted. “Light yellow is a nice light-filtering color, very modern. Also, considering the wall space, it’s suitable for adding family photographs, portraits… did you mention you have a son? Also, a nice wedding photo could go there…”

Shen Yuan interrupts the agent’s speech with a raised hand.

“I don’t have a wife,” he says, and the agent forces his smile a little more awkwardly. “Maybe we can see another one? This one is…” and really, he can’t say exactly *what it is.* Are the ceilings too high? Are the windows too rectangular? Is it too high up? He doesn’t think constantly looking down from the thirtieth floor will be pleasant for Luo Binghe… in

the long run. There's a different thing between flying on a sword and *living* at a height so… uncomfortably close to a bad memory of a fall. "…very elegant."

Perhaps the fact that it's elegant, even without furniture, makes him uncomfortable. The windows, the layout, the floors, even the kitchen's design. Plus, the kitchen is very small compared to what he would like.

The seller's expression twists slightly. Shen Yuan assumes it's the most expensive of all the ones he had thought of offering him.

"Something more homey, familiar?" the man hums, leading the way out. Shen Yuan stumbles a little on his cane as he tries to keep up, and the man shifts nervously, but Shen Yuan is grateful that he doesn't offer an arm or a hand. "There are some with slightly more classic moldings…"

The next one remains the epitome of luxury, with tons of fabulous lighting technology, and windows that don't even need curtains and can be darkened with a button on the side to give a view of the city as if it were nighttime in the middle of the day. The kitchen is fine, but the distance between the main bedroom and the bathroom is something Shen Yuan *isn't going* to walk on a bad day, and he still doesn't like windows much anyway. The bathroom is also cramped and doesn't have a comfortable bathtub.

The next one is a little smaller, has fewer windows, and feels suffocating.

The agent has clearly started to get nervous when they leave the fourth apartment, and Shen Yuan has broken out in a cold sweat, asking for a break to sit down. He sits down opposite him and begins rambling on about other models and designs. Perhaps it's better to see mock-ups before deciding, mock-up photographs with different furnishings?

Shen Yuan listens as best he can, trying not to go delirious with pain and exhaustion. After the mandatory five minutes of deep breathing and letting his muscles tremble are up, he stands up and lets the agent guide him to the next one.

…the next one isn't quite right either.

Shen Yuan arrives at his own apartment, dizzy, tired, hungry, and with a terrible headache. Luo Binghe makes him a double dose of tea after Shen Yuan insists just a little, helps him prepare a hot bath, and while Luo Binghe helps him with the trembling and pain in his legs, Chengle is looking through all the photos on his phone.

"I don't like it!" he says, pointing at the apartment Shen Yuan had seen as too cold. "It looks like that ugly hospital."

"Ugly," Shen Yuan repeats.

"Awful," Luo Binghe adds, looking over his shoulder, and both of them get an enthusiastic nod from Chengle.

The boy checks all the apartments. All of them, of course, have big, ugly, and enormous flaws. Chengle points them all out, and Shen Yuan is overjoyed that they both have the same dislikes about similar things: very high spaces that look difficult to decorate and rooms that look too easy to be left with empty spaces. Who has that much furniture to fit in a space like that? Also:

“This Lord doesn’t like such *high* places,” Luo Binghe says, his mouth twisting, and Chengle looks at him with a raised eyebrow and a smug expression. It’s funny how his small face manages to make so many gestures that, Shen Yuan is extremely certain, are typical of his own face.

“Is Father Emperor afraid of heights?” Chengle asks, with that tiny, playful expression. Shen Yuan gently pinches his cheek.

“And a little boy I know is afraid of the dark,” Shen Yuan points out, making Chengle squeal, his ears red. He hadn’t gotten five different nightlights in addition to his salt lamp for nothing. “It’s normal to have fears. No one should be ashamed of them.”

Chengle pouts. Then, with renewed curiosity, he asks, “Then, why Father Emperor…?”

Luo Binghe shifts uncomfortably before Chengle can even finish his question.

“Don’t bully your Father Emperor,” Shen Yuan says, his ticklish fingers moving menacingly in the air. “Come on, come on. Didn’t you want to show me that new story about the talking tigers?”

Chengle nods, completely enthusiastic, and runs off to find his new story. It's more like a picture-in-picture with some words in every page than a story, really, but the boy has an exceptional imagination for inventing more stories that aren't written down on the spot, and Shen Yuan tries to memorize it all so he can type it up. Although he's sure Chengle will make more changes to the story the next time he tells it.

Only later, when they are making dinner – or rather, Luo Binghe is cooking and Shen Yuan is clumsily chopping vegetables to try to be *a little* helpful – Luo Binghe says, in a low voice:

“This Lord isn’t afraid of heights,” he murmurs, his tone almost resigned. Shen Yuan nods. “This Lord fears… falling.”

“It’s not embarrassing,” Shen Yuan shrugs. His fingers are wet, so when he pats Luo Binghe’s arm, it feels a bit like he’s wiping his fingers dry. “Anyway, even if I find an apartment that’s a little high up, uh… I won’t let you fall.”

Luo Binghe looks at him. Shen Yuan is afraid that he might mock him, say something like 'as if Yuan-ge were strong enough to…' but all Luo Binghe does is smile.

“This Lord knows,” he says simply, and continues cooking. Shen Yuan feels like he *should* say something more, but he really has nothing more to say, so he keeps trying to get his vegetables at least evenly sliced. It’s much harder than Luo Binghe or all those damn video tutorials make it seem.

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Later that night, after dinner, Shen Yuan curls up watching Aladdin with Chengle, Binghe, and at least five different stuffed tigers, and doesn't even realize he's fallen asleep until he wakes up slightly only because someone has repositioned him so his neck isn't bent awkwardly.

“Baba Yuan is *very* tired,” Chengle says. Shen Yuan isn’t so asleep that he can’t hear him, but he’s not so awake that he can open his eyes or say something. At the same time, he’s in limbo enough that he can feel gentle hands covering him with a blanket, fluffing the pillow behind his neck. “I don’t like that he’s so tired.”

“Your Baba Yuan had a very long day,” Luo Binghe says, his voice very low. “He needs a good rest. We’ll let him rest well, okay?”

“I don’t like it,” Chengle repeats. Shen Yuan is struggling to open his stone-heavy eyes, trying to comfort his boy, when Chengle simply says, “You’re tiring him out! You give him that nasty medicine from Doctor Mu and make him sleepy *all the time*. That way, Baba Yuan never plays with me, and he’ll get bored of me, and you’ll steal him from me.”

The boy sounds *clearly* offended. Shen Yuan can almost imagine the tears in his eyes.

“That’s not right,” Luo Binghe says, but Chengle insists, with his childish stubbornness:

“Yes! Liar, liar, liar! I don’t like you. I don’t like you tiring Baba Yuan out. He’s sad and tired, and Father Emperor is with him *all the time*, and he’ll get bored of me and stay with you, and I’ll be *alone*,” Chengle’s voice broke into a sob. “*Again.*”

“Chengle,” Luo Binghe says with a wounded gentleness, and Shen Yuan tries, *really* tries to open his eyes. It’s not as if he’s under anesthesia. It’s actually a distinctly normal tiredness: he’s seen nearly six apartments in a single day, walked, checked, snooped at the details of the presentation models, seen many photographs of models, socialized and… yes. It had been a particularly exhausting day. “This Lord swears, by his hand and his blood, that he will *never* try to steal Yuan-ge from you. As your mother is your mother, and as this Emperor is your father, your Baba Yuan is *your* Baba. I will do nothing to take him away from you, nor anything to take you away from him. Do you take my word for it?”

“*No,*” the boy stammers, and then, “…everything was better when Father Emperor wasn’t here.”

Shen Yuan's tongue feels heavy, his chest aches, and tears are burning in his eyes. He still can't move, even though he can feel his tears gathering in his closed eyes.

“I *know*,” Luo Binghe says, and he sounds so dejected it hurts. “But this Emperor wants to do things right. This Lord…” and Luo Binghe is silent for a long moment before saying, “This Lord did much harm. To Chengle, to Yuan-ge. This Lord is only trying to redeem himself. And… now I seek to make amends for the harm I’ve done. The medicines Yuan-ge is taking may tire him out a little more,” Luo Binghe agrees, and it’s not as if Shen Yuan wouldn’t

know that anyway, “but they will help him feel much better. So he can play with Chengle all the time, without anything hurting him. Isn’t it better if nothing hurts him?”

Chengle seems hesitant. If he answers or makes any nonverbal gestures, Shen Yuan can't see him.

“It’s ugly when it hurts to Baba Yuan. I don’t like it,” Chengle says after a long moment of silence. “If it doesn’t hurt, it’s *fine*. But if Baba Yuan can’t play with me, Father Emperor will!”

Chengle says it like a threat. When Luo Binghe replies, “This Lord will do it,” it sounds like a promise. Shen Yuan can feel a single tear fall down his face, drifting off to sleep again with his heart at peace, knowing for certain that even if he had had great misgivings about it, right now, Luo Binghe is someone Shen Yuan can truly entrust his son to.

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Shen Yuan has already seen twelve apartments by the next afternoon. Of all of them, he likes three *more or less*. There's something uncomfortable about them that his mind still can't quite figure out, so he just lets it be in the background, with all the things he really doesn't want to think about until it's time to force himself to think about them. Like his therapy homework for the week.

Luo Binghe is helping him with cold poultices; now, for some unfortunate reason—probably due to tiredness and exertion from walking non-stop around for two days in a row—Shen Yuan has more burning than pain in his legs, and a slight fever, which is due to his general inflammation that has spread to his back. Luo Binghe is diligently applying the poultices, injecting some qi into specific points, which is a delightful relief, both of them listening as if:

“And gaze curtains! Like the ones at Jiu-ge and Uncle Yue’s house. Soft and pretty. I like soft and pretty,” Chengle says happily, continuing to show off his long pile of room collection. Shen Yuan isn’t so sure that thinking about decorations first and space later will help, but it’s not a bad idea after all. “And if I have a library, a very big library!, I can have a lot *more* books. Does Baba Yuan think Uncle Yue will buy me more books if he sees that I have a very big and very, very empty library?”

“Maybe,” Shen Yuan hums, looking through the large collections of clippings Chengle has made. They’re not bad choices. He’s an exceptionally creative boy with very good taste for his young age. At least, it’s better than what Shen Yuan would have decorated at his age. “How about a bed with drawers? You could store your toys in there, sleep on top of them, and you’d have more room to play.”

“Yes!” the boy squeals happily. He rummages through another paper, pointing. “Here. Baba Yuan must have a library! He has so many books everywhere! They look nicer in a library. Organized!”

“You think so?” Shen Yuan observes a disastrous combination of many bookcases stuck together. Well, maybe Chengle was a good decorator in *some* spaces. “Sounds like a lot of work to clean.”

“This Lord could clean up,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan snorts. Of course. A great Demon Emperor cleaning out his library of manga and fantasy books. Though it’s not like Luo Binghe hasn’t been cleaning his apartment lately, anyway. “Yuan-ge doesn’t have to worry about that.”

Shen Yuan sighs, “If it were up to Binghe, I wouldn’t have to worry about anything,” he complains, though judging by Luo Binghe’s smile, he doesn’t seem to actually take it as a complaint. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

Chengle continues to play with his clippings while Luo Binghe finishes applying the poultices and begins putting away all the ointments and such. Chengle holds his scissors menacingly over the pages of another new magazine Shen Yuan has brought. In fact, the three of them remain in a calm silence until Shen Yuan notices that Luo Chengle *has actually been silent* for over a minute, which in his son's language is the calm just before a big storm.

“Chengle?” he asks. Luo Binghe seems to notice the same thing, or at least, he can tell from his voice, because he steps aside so Shen Yuan can look through the boy’s clippings. He’s staring at the magazine with a frown, his scissors in his hands, and, oh… “Oh, honey. You don’t need to see those…”

“I know,” Chengle says, his voice hollow, looking at a stack of pages filled with cribs, bassinets, and a bunch of baby toys. Shen Yuan bites the inside of his cheek, cursing himself for not checking between the pages and maybe *tearing* them out before they could make his sweet little boy feel sick. “They’re ugly,” and he flips to the next, with another stack of different cribs. He looks very sulky.

Shen Yuan stretches out his arms. Chengle puts down his scissors and climbs onto the sofa next to him, snuggling up. Luo Binghe hesitates a moment before sitting on the boy's other side, and hesitates a moment more before patting his back a few slightly tensely. It's an attempt, Shen Yuan thinks, as he coos at the sulking child.

“We won’t need baby things,” Shen Yuan says, ready to repeat it as many times as necessary. “The only baby in this house is you. My sweet boy.”

Luo Chengle nods a little. Shen Yuan lets the child curl up in his arms, almost taking refuge in them, until he finally says:

“Mom would really like those silly baby things,” he complains, his voice sounding more hurt than sulking. “Mom spent a lot of time making all those ugly baby things. Embroidered fabrics and woven beds and all that ugly stuff. Ugly and hideous.” And the boy sniffles, fussing, and Shen Yuan pulls him closer into a tighter hug. He’s almost relieved that Luo Binghe doesn’t remove his hand from the boy’s back in silent support. “I told Mom that I wanted to redecorate my room too. She said that later when the baby was born we would. But we never did *anything.*” And finally, Chengle breaks down in a sad, quiet cry.

Shen Yuan pulls the boy onto his lap, rocking him. Luo Binghe moves closer, rubbing soothing circles on Chengle's back, and it feels as if they're one strong, united team. Chengle sobs, thick, bitter tears and a trembling pout, for a long time before calming down with soft hiccups.

“I’ll get some water,” Luo Binghe says, standing up. Shen Yuan brushes Chengle’s hair with his fingers, kisses his wet cheeks softly. The boy and his trembling pout look extremely sad, and Shen Yuan allows him to cry, hoping that tears might actually help him a little to cleanse the pain in his heart.

A glass of water later, being almost squeezed between Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan, Chengle’s pout trembles a little less as he says, in a tiny voice, “…I miss Mom.”

“Oh, baby,” Shen Yuan sighs, allowing the boy to continue climbing into a hug. He rocks him in his arms, and Luo Binghe watches with eyes that also seem a little watery. Shen Yuan ignores him for his own sanity right now. “It hurts a lot to miss her. But do you know that you can see your mom whenever you want? She loves you, and even though she’s very, very sad, she never stopped loving you. Wanting to see her is okay.”

“No,” Chengle protests. “She *replaced me.* And she’s sad and doesn’t love me anymore.”

“Your mother loves you,” Luo Binghe says, and Chengle sniffles harder, clearly ready to argue out loud if necessary. “She told me. She’s… not well,” Luo Binghe says, sighing. His face is serious, and despite his size, he looks small, hovering over Chengle, over both of them. “But she’s getting better. Every time I go to the palace and check on her, she demands that I talk about you. She loves *you*. And she loves Chenxue, but that doesn’t mean she loves you any less. Or does Hualing love her children any less because there are two of them?”

“Yes,” Chengle says stubbornly, pouting sadly. “She loves Shao-mei more. She lets her bite *everything.* Even *my* toys.”

Luo Binghe's shoulders tremble a little. He seems to be laughing.

“It’s because A-Shao is changing her fangs,” Luo Binghe explains, and even so, Chengle pouts. “A-Shao is more demon than human, and her fangs change faster. Chengle is more human than demon, and he hasn’t changed his baby teeth yet. When that happens, he’ll know why his Shao-mei wants to bite everything.”

“No,” Chengle continues to protest, squirming. Shen Yuan rubs his back, and the boy seems to want to shrink in his arms, his trembling pout regaining strength with new, glistening tears in his eyes. “I don’t like it. I don’t like missing Mom.”

“You don’t *have* to miss her,” Shen Yuan says. He tries not to be pushy, but he believes Chengle needs to have the choice in front of him, clear and certain. Something to hold onto, something firm and secure to count on. “Sweetheart, you can really go see her whenever you want. I’m sure your mother will be happy to see you.”

“That’s true,” Luo Binghe hums, and Chengle hides himself further against Shen Yuan’s sweater. “Your mother doesn’t want to pressure you or force you to go see her if it hurts you. But she’ll be happy to see you whenever you want to go see her.”

Chengle makes a small sound of protest. He doesn't respond. He cries a little more, then Shen Yuan helps him wash his face, and Luo Binghe makes him some warm milk with honey and some herbs. Luo Chengle pouts for the rest of the afternoon, a sad little face that isn't cheered

up by magazine clippings, his favorite movies, or playing with his tigers. In fact, as if those stuffed tigers know he's sad, they seem to curl up around him protectively.

Just at night, after a dinner of Chengle's favorite dumplings, the boy is snuggled up in bed when he tugs at Shen Yuan's sleeve. He snuggles up to the boy, responding to the boy's call for hugs and cuddles for a while, until Chengle says, "If Mom doesn't love me, I'll be so sad. I'll be sadder than she is, and I won't want to see her anymore."

“She loves you,” Shen Yuan says, as softly and quickly as he can. He doesn’t even hesitate about it. “You are a very, very loved boy, you know that, darling? Sadness… doesn’t mean less love. It just means sadness, and that doesn’t stop your mom from loving you.”

There's something odd about Chengle's little eyes when he looks at him. Shen Yuan thinks his boy is about to cry again, but his mouth doesn't curve into that quivering pout that tells of his tears, and when his boy sighs, snuggling up to his Dawang Tiger, Shen Yuan feels just a little struck by something he can't quite place.

“I want to see Mom,” says his sweet boy, a decision that is enormous and heavy, but he says it with a voice that doesn’t tremble and an expression that doesn’t waver. “Will Baba Yuan come with me? Tomorrow?”

“Sure,” Shen Yuan says, quick and automatic, and Chengle nods. He yawns, and small tears glisten at the corners of his eyes. Shen Yuan kisses his eyelids, his forehead, and brushes his hair away from his face. “I’ll be with you whenever you need me. I’ll *never* leave you. Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” says his child, with a sleepy softness. “Baba Yuan always… with me…”

The child babbles before falling asleep. Only then, a while later, when Shen Yuan has already rocked him a great deal and soaked in his peaceful little face, sleeping after a long day of sad faces and crying, does Shen Yuan slip out of his own bed, his heart in his throat and a small, very slight headache.

Luo Binghe is looking at him from the sofa, with a slightly tense expression.

“Well,” Shen Yuan says, his breath hitching a little. He feels dazed, his brain slowly processing the decision he just made. “I’ll cancel tomorrow’s apartment-viewing appointment. Uh. I think we’ll go to the palace.”

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Making arrangements before crossing over worlds is a bit more complicated than Shen Yuan thought (not that he’s *actively* thought about what kind of arrangements he should make to go to Luo Binghe’s world anyway). He had to write to Airplane and have a long conversation filled with instructions to guard his apartment, keep his phone, and stern threats not to check his browsing history on *any* device to cover up an alibi in case one of his siblings texts looking for him or, worse, drops in for a surprise visit.

Then, he packed a personal backpack: enough medicine for a week—not that he planned to stay a week, actually, he hoped it wouldn't be *that* long. He didn't cancel his therapy session the next week, not without feeling immensely guilty about it, *as well as* for not doing his homework. He didn't add the herbs and poultices anyway, confident there would be more at the palace.

When he's begun separating sets of clothes as stealthily as possible without waking the sleeping child, Luo Binghe brings him a qiankun bag, and Shen Yuan has to sit for a moment when, out of curiosity, he puts his hand in up to the wrist, then up to the elbow, and there's no external strain whatsoever in the bag. He covers his mouth with one hand, trying to keep his hysterical laughter from sounding too loud, and still decides to pack a backpack, leaving the bag on his desk. Maybe he can pack the backpack in the qiankun bag later.

A bit of hysteria, five different sets of clothes later, another moment of sitting back and hiding his how the fuck is he supposed to dress when he's going to some fucking underground xianxia palace in some xianxia world he read about where he'll probably meet and be judged by a bunch of all the wives of that Demon Emperor who fucking lives in his fucking house hysteria, Shen Yuan takes a deep breath, slaps his face to calm himself, and finishes packing.

Only when it's almost 2 a.m. and Shen Yuan is still tossing and turning, thinking about what to pack, does he decide to raid the kitchen and pack all kinds of junk food and sweets. In fact, he orders a bunch of junk food, sakura cookies, Oreos of every flavor, and almost every kind of MSG-laced candy from the nearest 24-hour convenience store, and is absolutely miserable when the haggard, pale delivery man brings him a large box, which Luo Binghe picks up in the door, a little confused.

"I thought," Shen Yuan says, and he thinks his voice sounds bordering on hysteria, "what would they possibly like? I mean, well, *some of* it has way too much sugar for other kids. I mean, I think it would be *really* bad for them because of their lack of exposure to the refined sugar in this world, and uh, all those ridiculous preservatives. Well, they're not that ridiculous, because the marketing and preservation processes in this world should be suitable for a longer shelf life, but…" Luo Binghe is wiping down the box and the products, giving him looks that are looking increasingly worried. "I thought. Uh. Chengle's siblings? Those who are not rude to him? Maybe them likes it. And, uh. Sha Hualing? And Mingyan? Hell, I think even Ning Yingying or Mu Qingfang would like some junk food. Uh, if I'm allowed to get close, I think—I mean, I know men aren't allowed in the harem, besides you, of course, but, I promised Chengle I wouldn't leave his side and…"

"Yuan-ge," Luo Binghe said, taking his hand. Shen Yuan realized he'd been gesticulating nervously in the air. "Breathe."

"I'm breathing," he protests, but still allows Luo Binghe to sit with him and takes a few deep breaths. He's nervous, yes, but who wouldn't be? He's not just diving headfirst into a xianxia cultivator world, but into a damn harem novel complete with wife plots, poisons, papapa plants, beasts, and wives—and considering the long list of potential dangers on the list, the beasts were the least dangerous. *At least* they weren't wild and loose, capable of devouring him alive on the grounds of the underground palace.

It's not like Shen Yuan *doesn't know* that Chengle comes from a PIDW. However, separating Chengle from PIDW had been ridiculously easy: his sweet little boy hadn't even been mentioned by name in any part of the story, and while it was common knowledge that Luo Binghe had children, plural, it wasn't really… named. And yet... Shen Yuan was a little grateful about it. His little boy, his sweet heart, his fears and the sadness of his tears, but also the joy of his laughter… it wasn't something that belonged to the world for its enjoyment and criticism.

…no one's life should belong like this, anyway.

"Is Yuan-ge feeling better?" Luo Binghe asks. Without saying or asking anything, he has begun packing all the disinfected items into *another* qiankun bag, and Shen Yuan thanks him.

"I'm nervous," he confesses. He takes a deep breath, then another. "I don't… I don't know what I'm doing."

Luo Binghe hums. He finishes packing and sits down next to him. Shen Yuan has a silly realization that Luo Binghe is already in a comfortable pair of pajamas, clearly more willing to sleep than Shen Yuan had been as he gradually went absolutely crazy, and embarrassment hits him a little as he feels foolish and ridiculous.

"Yuan-ge will meet Chengle's mother, and other people in the palace. Is that what's making you nervous?" Luo Binghe asks. Shen Yuan has a feeling he might, but not at the same time. He tries to think about it, to *really* try to put his finger on it. He… Well. The answer is right there, so close, that he laughs a little hysterically behind his hand again.

"Something like that," he says, sighing. He rubs his eyes; at this point in the early morning, *they burn.* "I'd like… to be liked by them. To get along with them and the children," and he grimaces. "My family is… is a good family. Yes, Jiu-ge and Ming-ge might be hitting each other one day, but the important thing is how much they care for each other during the week. It's just… my family is close, *and* I liked growing up in it." And Shen Yuan sighs, getting to the heart of the matter with a strange feeling against his throat. "I'd like them to like me. If we got along, then Chengle would grow up in a family like mine."

"Yuan-ge is too noble," Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan sighs, exhausted enough to roll his eyes. "And Yuan-ge shouldn't worry about it. This Lord has spoken with Mingyan and Hualing. While Hualing had too many questions, This Lord can assure Yuan-ge that they already consider anyone who cares for Chengle with the love Yuan-ge has shown worthy of their family."

Shen Yuan exhales slowly. It feels like a terrible weight has been lifted from his back.

"Thank you," he says finally, and Luo Binghe gives him a reassuring smile. Then, he bites his lip, trying not to make the question sound rude as he says, "…And the… other wives?"

"This Lord hasn't had much of a chance to… *talk* to his other wives," Luo Binghe says, sounding odd about it, and Shen Yuan snorts a laugh. Well, *yes.* It's Luo Binghe, they're his wives. It's definitely not that… *they talk* particularly much. Isn't that why PIDW sold so well, anyway?

“Okay,” Shen Yuan sighs. He feels like he’s been deflating from chaotic emotions with each breath. Really, what a melodrama. “I’ll go to sleep. Tomorrow will be a… long day.”

“Good night,” Luo Binghe says. However, when Shen Yuan stands up, Luo Binghe stands up behind him and follows him to the bedroom. Shen Yuan feels equal parts foolish and pathetic standing there, in the doorway of his own bedroom, watching Luo Binghe observe him with an attention Shen Yuan can’t quite fathom, and feeling his own heart pounding against his throat.

“Good night,” Shen Yuan says, too.

Luo Binghe looks like he's about to say something. He doesn't. He just smiles, soft, subtle, and Shen Yuan feels his hands tremble when he finally closes the door in his face. They're still trembling when he puts on his pajamas and covers himself. In fact, his hands only stop trembling when Chengle curls up against him, using him as a pillow, and one of the stuffed tigers yawns and curls up beside him, purring to soothe him.

What a day, and it hadn't even started.

Chapter End Notes

SY: I'm FINE.
SY, too: *has a meltdown because he's going to meet THE OTHER WIVES*

SY, too: I'M FINE.
SY, too: *sneaks off to look at apartments on his own to take his mind off THE THERAPY HOMEWORK. HE EVEN AGREES TO GO TO ANOTHER WORLD SO AS NOT TO THINK ABOUT THE HOMEWORK. HE'S PERFECTLY FINE*

I want you to know that there's a discarded scene with Jiu-ge accompanying Shen Yuan to look at apartments. I discarded it because I just felt so sorry for the real estate agent. Plus, Shen Yuan needed time alone :P

Chengle imitating Shen Yuan's facial expressions after a long time together - yes, this child is definitely a Shen now, no blood or adoption necessary, just look at him, he's so cute, he makes me feel tender aggression and I want to bite his sweet cheeks :3
Also, Chengle reluctantly accepting that his dumb Father Emperor is telling him the truth and feeling a little bad about the hurtful things he said. He's a baby. We all love him *cries loudly*

AH, NEXT CHAPTER THERE WILL BE A PALACE. AND HAREM. AND MINGYAN AND HUALING AND MORE LUO BABIES. AND IT WILL BE THE CHAPTER 28. MAYBE NOT EVERYONE IS AWARE, BUT A FEW WEEKS AGO I TOOK A POLL ON TUMBLR ABOUT WHETHER A CERTAIN THING I DIDN'T SAY WOULD HAPPEN OR NOT HAPPEN IN CHAPTER 28 OR NOT. THERE WERE EXACTLY 100 VOTES, AND "HAPPENS," IT WON WITH 83%. Honestly,

yes, I was VERY unsure whether it would happen or not. I left it in the hands of fate (you). NOW IT HAS CLOSE. IT WILL HAPPEN. WHAT WILL HAPPEN?? GUESS!!! :P

AH, THANK YOU AGAIN FOR ALL YOUR SUPPORT!!! Every comment makes my heart feel light, and you fill me with such warm words, such kind care, you are so gentle, that I turn into a ball of tears and emotions. Literally. The other day my sister saw me crying because I received a really nice comment and she got worried. But I promise I'm okay. In fact, all of you, even if I'm at the bottom of the pit, are the light and the stars to me!!! THANK YOU FOR SO MUCH!!!!
Well, well, you know!!!! Interactions-kudos-comments, let's have fun together, until next time!!!

See you soon! :D

Chapter 28: Second chances for an old home

Chapter Notes

MY HUSBAND (AO3) IS GOING TO WAR (WILL BE DOWN FOR 20 HOURS) TOMORROW, SO I'M POSTING THE CHAPTER NOW SO YOU'LL HAVE MORE TIME TO READ IT OR DOWNLOAD IT IF YOU LIKE :D

Remember I told you something would *happen* in this chapter 28? Well, it will happen in 29, because it was either that or upload a chapter of approximately 18k, and I only do that on A Jade Heart or Shen Yuan Temporary Transmigration System /j

A BIG THANK YOU TO KSYE DARLING FOR NAMING THE OTHER LUO BABIES *hugs* Not only did she name Chengle, but now here are the other Luo babies we'll see here and in the rest of the fic, so thank you!!!! God knows it was hard for me to decide between names, and she put a huge effort into giving me a ton of options :'3
Luo babies here:
Anhe - 安 (ān) "quiet, calm, peaceful, tranquil" & 赫 (hè) "bright, radiant, glowing"
Shaoyu - 劭 (shào) "encourage, excel, excellent" & 妤 (yú) "beautiful, fair"
Chenxue - 晨 (chén) meaning "early morning, daybreak" & 薛 (xuē) meaning a type of marsh grass

Chapter warnings: There's surprisingly just a little ableism here!! We're making progress (or getting very distracted)

Enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Early in the morning, Shen Yuan cancels his appointment to view apartments. He speaks in a fake hoarse voice (it's not bad, considering it's early morning) saying he's caught a nasty cold and won't be able to attend. The agent is kind and reschedules for next week, wishing him a quick recovery.

He also sends a new stack of photos to print, which should arrive in a couple of hours. A new *big* stack of photos to print.

An hour later, Airplane arrives. He looks like he hasn't slept a wink all night, so Shen Yuan, in addition to repeating all the instructions, leaves them in writing, along with important emergency numbers, a reminder of his phone unlock pattern, important passwords in case of an emergency, and a warning that, for the love of *God,* he shouldn't just eat cheap ramen and order good food.

When Chengle wakes up, he's in a slightly ambivalent mood, but he doesn't regret it or back down. He's decided they'll go *today*, and not even Airplane's visit changes his mind.

When his child has had breakfast, bathed, and his hair is all dry and in perfectly fluffy, precious curls, Shen Yuan starts packing the most important things: all of Chengle's hair creams—he reminds himself to buy *more.* There must be other children with similar hair. Aren't there?—his hairbrushes, his change of clothes since his little devil of a son refuses to wear robes *ever again*, all of his favorite storybooks and fairytales, and he even extends the mouth of the qiankun bag that Luo Binghe has put out specifically for packing Chengle's things so that a row of stuffed tigers walk right in. Shen Yuan watches what he's seeing, feeling as if his brain has snapped a little before he goes any further. New normal! He must get used to it!

Dawang Tiger won't leave Chengle's side. Shen Yuan is absolutely certain there's no way he'll be able to put him away, so Chengle will just have to carry him. He doesn't weigh anything, what the hell, he's a freaking stuffed tiger.

His shipment of the printed photographs arrives a hour after breakfast, when Airplane has finally fallen asleep in Shen Yuan's bed. Shen Yuan is still compulsively buying last-minute packing supplies, and Chengle is jumping on the sofa demanding that his Father Emperor return them to the apartment and not kidnap them or he's going to bite him so hard he's going to cry.

Shen Yuan figures that's a good enough threat, even though the image of Luo Binghe crying doesn't look as far removed from him as it might have seemed weeks ago.

“Yuan-ge…” says Luo Binghe (already dressed in his Emperor robes even as he follows him around the house in his socks) when Shen Yuan has repacked all his clothes, including even the thin sweaters and other quality clothing his mother has been giving him. Hell, he even had to remove the tags from some of them! “*Yuan-ge,*” Luo Binghe insists, forcing him to sit down. Shen Yuan forces himself to take a deep breath before Luo Binghe tells him so, hesitating with a silk shirt in his hands. “Yuan-ge has packed enough. *Please*.”

Shen Yuan figures that if even the Great and Powerful (not sarcastically said this time) Luo Binghe is willing to ask him for something, he's probably already crossed the line. Way too far.

“Sorry,” he sighs. “I’m just a little anxious.”

“Also,” and Luo Binghe, as if he was really waiting for Shen Yuan to go crazy so he could pull a secret weapon straight out of his sleeve, *literally* pulls a package out of his sleeve, “This Lord has something for Yuan-ge.”

“Is it a gift?” Chengle pokes his curious little nose out, climbing onto the sofa. He hasn’t put on his robes, though they tried even against his will: it’s clear that the boy has not only grown much plumper, but has he really grown that much taller? It hasn't even been that long! But the robes reach well above his calves! Was his boy so undernourished that he wasn’t growing *at all*? “Why is Father Emperor giving a gift? *It’s not* a courtship gift.” Despite his nervousness, Shen Yuan bursts out laughing. His brain is literally fried between a possessive

child and a mysterious package in his hands. “Father Emperor hasn’t collected enough points yet!”

“Is not,” Luo Binghe sighs, and Shen Yuan has no idea why he’s playing this ridiculous game with his son. Well, *at least* they’re playing a game together, which is already a good thing. “It’s to make your Baba Yuan feel more… comfortable.”

Luo Chengle makes an indignant sound, which turns into a gasp as Shen Yuan opens the paper and is met with embroidered silks of a quality that would make a modern designer or any cosmaker envy weep.

“This Lord has been working with specific dressmakers,” Luo Binghe says, as if Shen Yuan’s silence as he stares at the fabric is anything more than fascination. “Since Yuan-ge agreed to come visit, this Lord has been putting the palace’s finest dressmakers to work for him. A full wardrobe awaits him in the palace, should he wish to use them.”

Shen Yuan stands unsteadily, unwrapping the robe. It's a set of two robes, an inner and outer one, Shen Yuan guesses. The belt holding them together is a pale thing, filled with things that glisten like silver threads and tiny micro-crystals that…

“*Shit*,” he says, and Chengle lets out a stifled laugh, bouncing back up and down on the sofa beside him. “Are these Crystal Phoenix Tears?”

“Some, yes,” Luo Binghe says, touching the edge of the belt. “They keep the wearer free from the effects of curses, shattering as they absorb their effects each time. A Volcanic Heartstone, which warns its wearer of anyone approaching with harmful intent. Embroidered with threads sourced from Demonic Spiders of the Silver Valley, it fits around the Volcanic Heartstone, warning the wearer of any nearby danger…”

Luo Binghe continues listing every detail of the set of robes. The belt alone is stronger than a damn suit of armor, and Shen Yuan has already lost his absolute mind when the fabric, soft and silky beneath his fingers, turns out to be embroidered with multiple protective talismans. Hell, that damn robe could have been made of Kevlar, because not even Luo Binghe's claws seemed able to tear or cut through it.

“This Lord’s world is dangerous,” Luo Binghe says, as Shen Yuan remains breathless, voiceless, his racing heartbeat thumping against his ribs. “This Emperor is certain that Chengle wouldn’t want to lose his Baba over just a minor oversight.”

Shen Yuan has to sit down before he finds the ability to speak sensibly. Even then, he doesn't let go of the robe, so soft between his fingers and so heavy against his heart.

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Shen Yuan keeps his best dress pants and a fancy shirt underneath, the kind with fancy embroidery on the collar and fabric-covered buttons, but Luo Binghe helps him put the robe on and fold it properly, and even Chengle looks at him with a wide smile, eyes sparkling.

“Baba Yuan looks very handsome! Baba Yuan is a prince!” he says, and pulls at Shen Yuan’s hand. Shen Yuan waves his entire arm in the air, observing the pleasing ripples of the outer robe. They are comfortable, heavy fabrics, and not as warm as he had imagined. Though that’s probably because he only has two and not four or six, and they’re in the grip of winter.

Chengle's hair is in a high ponytail, fluffy curls everywhere. Shen Yuan has dressed him in his new embroidered sweater—his Nainai's first gift of the year—and his best, cleanest sneakers. His mood has been improving throughout the morning, and now, almost at the end of a chaotic morning, closer to lunchtime than anything else, Chengle is almost cheerful about it, as if it were another visit to the zoo or some long, beautiful walk.

“There’s only one handsome prince here,” Shen Yuan says, because it’s the obvious thing to say, pinching Chengle’s cheek. His sweet boy laughs, trying to nibble at his fingers with a wide grin, and Shen Yuan pulls him with every ounce of effort in his body into his arms, spinning him around in his arms until he’s almost off balance. Luo Binghe catches them both, luckily, which is probably too pathetic even for him, judging by the way Luo Binghe avoids looking at him directly.

The cane kind of messes up his new silly xianxia cultivator cosplay, but with his new qiankun long sleeves (which Shen Yuan hasn't put to the test yet. He's really, *really* okay with everything he's gone crazy over, and doesn't want to fucking lose all his sanity) it's easy to hide in plain sight. His comfy-but-stylish white dress shoes aren't even visible, and just for once, Shen Yuan *is grateful* that his siblings throw all these galas and want him to go to at least one a year. Otherwise, he'd be showing up at PIDW in *sneakers*, and he's pretty sure he wouldn't forgive himself for being so ridiculous.

Finally ready, Shen Yuan wakes Airplane up to let him know they're leaving (and the damn author almost has a breakdown worse than his when he sees the robes full of *fucking treasures*) and only then, with a final message to his family that his family won't know is the last until he's replaced by Airplane for a couple of days, Shen Yuan takes Chengle's hand tightly and is ready to cross over to another world.

Then Luo Binghe pulls Xin Mo out, and Shen Yuan has to step back with Chengle, feeling like he’s been punched in the gut. It’s the worst reaction he’s ever had, and it even lingers when Luo Binghe has already sheathed the sword, surrounded by a multitude of seals and talismans that *weren’t* there last time. He’s dizzy all the way through the portal. In fact, he even misses the first glimpses of the high ceilings and the somber yet elegant decor in his efforts to normalize his breathing, afraid that he’ll throw up all his breakfast and stain the soft Northern Bloodbear fur rug – a white bear that wasn’t actually that white, but instead, to look more dangerous as a predator, its fur mimicked the color of blood on strategic parts of its claws, mouth, and chest, as if it had perpetually just caught prey.

Then his brain *clicks* that he’s looking at a rug of an animal that doesn't exist and he really *have to sit down.*

“Baba Yuan! Is Baba Yuan okay? Aren’t Baba going to get sick?” And Chengle, his sweet little boy, is there to hold his hand, showing him how something out of a book can be as real as anything else. *Good*. Shen Yuan takes a deep breath, and holding onto his cane, he stands up from where Luo Binghe has dragged a stool to sit him down.

“Well, now I can’t say my subway experiences are the most horrible I’ve ever had traveling,” Shen Yuan complains. He takes another deep breath, gives Chengle’s hand a tiny squeeze, and works up the courage to meet Luo Binghe’s gaze. His eyes are worried, but the tension in his face eases when Shen Yuan smiles his best shit-eating grin. “Well, oh great and powerful Lord Luo, this is your territory. Lead the way.”

“As Yuan-ge wishes,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan isn’t exactly sure what it is, but something about his voice sends an weird chill down his spine.

Luo Binghe has opened the portal to a small study adjacent to the Emperor room in the heart of the palace. He doesn't waste any time calling for a few mostly humanoid servants, who arrive as gentle creatures bowing their heads, though Shen Yuan doesn't miss the number of curious glances they cast in his direction. He's sure that if his clothes hadn't drawn too much attention, his hair is doing all the work.

While it's true that Luo Binghe has only occasionally indulged in his informality, hearing him speak and watching him move around, ordering the servants around to prepare for the visit gives Shen Yuan a feeling he can't quite place. This is, after all, the Emperor Luo Binghe, the one Shen Yuan has read about, followed through his conquests of territories and wives, celebrated his triumphs, and stood with his heart in his mouth when any beast of the Abyss seemed too dangerous even for the Protagonist.

Luo Binghe fits the bill perfectly: his voice is firm and clear, his appearance haughty and imposing, and Shen Yuan feels his mouth dry and his heart racing to the point where he forces himself to focus on anything in the study to distract himself. Chengle is giving directions to poor Dawang Tiger, who looks like a cat that's been brought into a strange house, sniffing around with his tail bristling and his big, plastic eyes wide open.

“Finish preparing the room next,” Luo Binghe continues to command firmly, when one of the servants lets out a stifled groan. Shen Yuan looks at him with a curious brow raised, and the servant looks away as if Shen Yuan is going to hit him. Not that Shen Yuan could, anyway. “Send word to the servants and guards in the inner harem. Increase security in the outer palace harem. Repeat the security sweeps and confiscate anything that looks dangerous, from hairpins to flowers of unidentifiable origin.”

Chengle makes a sound of disgust. Shen Yuan turns to his boy, who has sat down on the plush rug, scratching behind his Dawang Tiger's ears.

“Is something wrong, honey?” Shen Yuan hums, taking a seat on the comfortable rug next to him. Chengle snorts again.

“I don’t like it,” he says softly, glancing at where Luo Binghe continues to give orders. “When Father Emperor earns points, I don’t like it.”

Shen Yuan snorts. “So why is your father earning points now?” he asks, already resigned. He has no idea when Chengle will realize that this kind of game of his is quite unlikely, but it seems to be something that both father and son enjoy, so Shen Yuan isn’t going to interfere too much.

“Take care of Baba Yuan,” the boy complains. “Then he has a lot of points, and I don’t like it.”

“Aiya,” Shen Yuan snorts. “Well, he brought us here, he brought *me* here, so it’s his responsibility to take care of me for putting me in a dangerous place in the first place. Does that help him not get so many points?”

Chengle considers this. Then, he nods repeatedly with a triumphant expression. Shen Yuan gently pats his head, delighted by his sweet son's wide smile. Truly, this child and his games…

The servants leave after a long moment of taking orders. They give Shen Yuan strange glances as they leave, and before they can even finish leaving, they are hissing at each other in a chilling-sounding demonic language. Shen Yuan sighs deeply, and when Luo Binghe extends his hand to help him up, Shen Yuan takes it. Chengle leaps to his feet, pulling Shen Yuan's other hand with a tug that Shen Yuan could almost call possessive.

“The rooms will be arranged for Yuan-ge, adjacent to this Lord’s room,” Luo Binghe explains, his tone warm and gentle, far from the hostile way he speaks to servants. “A servant will be assigned to guide him, accompany him, and attend to anything Yuan-ge needs.”

“Does they have a sword?” Chengle asks, frowning down at Luo Binghe from his small size. “They must have a sword! That way they can defend Yuan-ge if some of Father Emperor’s mean wives are rude. And they’ll threaten and frighten *them*, and they’ll run away.”

“They’ll have a sword,” Luo Binghe says, his voice soothing. Shen Yuan is already on his feet, one hand occupied by each of the heavenly demons, interjecting why none of them have let go. This is to be expected from Chengle, but seriously, Binghe… “This Lord has urgent matters to attend to earlier today, however…”

“*Of course,*” Chengle complains, huffing. Shen Yuan grimaces.

“*However*,” Luo Binghe continues with only a hint of firmness. Chengle averts his expression, an indignant grimace clearly on his face, “this Emperor will try to be available for Chengle in the afternoon, and this one will be the one to cook dinner. Is Chengle good with this?”

“Fine,” Chengle says, still pouting indignantly, and Luo Binghe tries to force a smile. Shen Yuan sighs; well, there’s still a long way to go. Chengle is clearly more emotional being in the palace.

Luo Binghe finally lets go of his hand. He unpacks the various qiankun bags, and Shen Yuan finds himself trying to learn how his own sleeves work for storing things. Chengle is in a slightly better mood when Luo Binghe wanders off to find things on his desk, teaching him, and is amused when Shen Yuan begins to find the thought of having an infinity in long, uncomfortable sleeves more interesting than disturbing.

“One last thing,” Luo Binghe says, approaching with a small wooden box. He opens it in front of him, and Shen Yuan feels dizzy again. “Yuan-ge should use this.”

“I don’t wear jewelry,” Shen Yuan says, eyeing the pendant with the red stone in the center. “Besides, wouldn’t that be too much…?”

“It’s more useful than showy,” says Luo Binghe, holding up the pendant. It’s true that the chain of silver beads actually looks almost inconspicuous; the only visible jewelry is the flamboyant red stone. “This stone is forged from this Emperor’s blood; thus, he will know where Yuan-ge is anywhere in the palace.” Shen Yuan holds the cold stone in his free hand, trying to decipher how Luo Binghe is supposed to have managed to turn his blood parasites into something beautiful like *this*. “If Yuan-ge refuses, unfortunately, even if he doesn’t wish to, he must drink this Lord’s blood so that he can…”

“*No,*” Chengle protests, pulling Shen Yuan’s hand. “No, no! Baba Yuan will use it! Baba Yuan will use it!”

Shen Yuan sighs, laughing. He accepts the pendant and slips it over his head. It sits loosely against his chest, almost to the height of his heart, so it's no trouble to tuck it into his robes, leaving only the silver chain subtly visible.

“There, there,” he says, patting where he’s left the covered stone. “Better?”

Luo Binghe looks at him with a strange expression. “Better,” he says after a moment of silence.

The servant Luo Binghe called for him arrives a moment later. Shen Yuan listens to all the instructions while Chengle shifts, uncomfortable and tense, occasionally pouting.

“Nervous, baby?” Shen Yuan asks. Chengle nods, hiding between his legs. He’s a pretty little thing, with moist eyes and a mouth curved in a sweet pout. “I promise everything will be okay. Come on, you know how gossipy those servants can be. I’m sure word has gotten around by now, and your mom will be waiting for you.”

“What if she doesn’t?” Chengle asks. Shen Yuan strokes the pink cheek of the child clinging to his legs as if he doesn’t want to let go.

“She will be,” Shen Yuan promises, and as soon as he says it, he knows it’s true. “She loves you and will be happy to see you. I promise.”

Chengle doesn't seem any more convinced. However, he doesn't cry or back down from his decision to see her, and Shen Yuan already considers it a win-win.

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The servant introduces herself as Zi-Zhao. She *definitely* has a sword, but she also has pale greyish skin with small horns sprouting from her forehead curling back on her head and scaly sets under her eyes, with large, pitch-black eyes and a calm expression, wearing the understated black robes of imperial servants. Shen Yuan bites his tongue to avoid asking her about her type of demon, if Shen Yuan remembers correctly from Airplane's descriptions, she's from the south where Luo Binghe obtained a surprisingly humanoid wife, rejected for

being similar to mortals. Bah! Was Airplane really that cowardly? These demons looked so cool! Couldn't Luo Binghe have a wife who looked creepy cool?

Although Chengle doesn't, Shen Yuan bids Binghe a goodbye before allowing the servant to guide them. She shows them where Shen Yuan's new bedroom is, one door further away, accessible only through Luo Binghe's Emperor main room, the gardens, or Luo Binghe's study as a gateway to the outside of the imperial chambers—a room now occupied by a group of servants hurriedly completing preparations. Shen Yuan receives alarmed glances from several servants hurrying to clean and carry pillows and blankets around as if afraid of being scolded just to be seen.

Shen Yuan ignores them as best he can, just as he ignores the fact that Luo Binghe is having them prepare a room ridiculously close to his own. Chengle is a little grumbling, but when they go out into the hallway, his complaints and sulking are clearly nervousness, while their steps are followed by the Dawang Tiger. Shen Yuan figures they should give that stuffed animal a good bath before letting it back on the bed.

Zi-Zhao does a good job of being a halfway tour guide and halfway servant: she explains the route; introduces him to any servants they meet in the way (“This is Junshang’s Noble Guest. You will be at his command just as you are at Junshang’s.”). She doesn’t laugh at Shen Yuan’s silly attempts at humor by making a map with signposts, and in fact, she looks at him as if Shen Yuan is a bit of a fool, so he just bites his tongue whenever he wants to make some kind of humorous comment to lighten the mood.

Shen Yuan holds his cane in one hand and his sweet little boy, who never lets go of it, in the other. He tries to memorize the corridors, but by the fourth turn in an unfamiliar direction, he's already pretty lost. It already feels like he's walked two blocks, and only when he's about to ask for a break to sit down does Zi-Zhao inform him that they're entering the inner harem pavilions.

“I need… a moment,” he asks, and he’s really grateful that Zi-Zhao lets him sit even if it’s just in the frame of a circular window. The window overlooks some pretty gardens, and as Shen Yuan takes a deep breath and tries not to look pathetic—which he supposes he already looks. He can feel the cold sweat on his skin—he watches in the distance a small group of women covered in silks, clearly gossiping among themselves. It’s too far away to make any of them out, but the silks look of high quality, and they are literally like colorful flowers among the artificial green gardens of the underground palace, with an artificial crystal sky projecting a sun that was only who knows how much higher up.

Chengle has climbed up to sit beside him, clinging to him hug. Shen Yuan rubs soothing circles on his back as he tries to catch his breath.

Zi-Zhao doesn't look uncomfortable. She's a good professional who takes a fan from her belt and uses it to give Shen Yuan some air; Shen Yuan is embarrassed about it, but he's not going to refuse it when it helps him a little.

“Is Baba Yuan feeling better?” Chengle asks. The sleeves of his pretty sweater are a little longer, covering half his hands, and he fiddles nervously with them. Shen Yuan kisses his forehead, brushing some curls behind his ears with his fingers.

“A little better,” he promises. “Come on, come on. The faster we get there, the faster this old Baba of yours will be able to sit somewhere more comfortable.”

Chengle laughs a little, jumping out of the window and pulling on his hand to help him up. Shen Yuan feels that his smile is a mirror of his laughter, and nods to Zi-Zhao, who puts away the fan and they continue on their way.

One more corridor, Shen Yuan digs his heels into the ground before advancing directly through the gardens.

“Is it *necessary?”* he asks quietly, observing how the gardens stretch out, filled with artificial sunlight, trees that seem oblivious to the harsh winter that must be raging outside the underground palace. A little further on, it’s clear that there are a large number of flowers — err, Binghe’s wives— of course, arranged in a strategic position to observe anyone who passes through the gardens’ main cobbled path.

“It’s the shortest path,” Zi-Zhao explains gently. “Does Noble Consort Shen wish to proceed by another path? It will be longer, and this humble one doesn’t believe—”

“*Noble Consort* Shen?” Shen Yuan chokes. Zi-Zhao looks at him with a curious expression. “No, *no*, you’re wrong. Uh. I’m a, uh, friend. Of Luo- of Junshang. You shouldn’t…” He waves his hand. “Don’t call me that.” He feels ridiculous just thinking about it. Ha! Consort, *Noble Consort, him*?! Yes, Luo Binghe often brings wives back from his travels, but *no*! Shen Yuan is a man! He looks like a man! To mistake him for a consort, and also a position like *Noble* Consort, really?! Where does he look like a woman!?

Chengle also said, “Baba Yuan *is not* Father Emperor’s Consort,” standing up straight in his diminutive stature, speaking in a firm voice that caught the servant’s eye. “Father Emperor hasn’t earned enough marriage points to become on his husband yet. Baba Yuan is *my* Baba Yuan.”

“*Chengle,*” Shen Yuan feels his face redden. Seriously, this kid! This isn’t a game he should be repeating in front of… in front of anyone who might think he’s serious!

“This humble servant understands,” Zi-Zhao said, bowing respectfully. A little smile is on her face. “As the Little Prince says. So, is it Young Master Shen’s wish to go another path?”

Shen Yuan is ready to say yes. Then he imagines himself walking down many more endless corridors just to avoid passing a bunch of women, and realizes how absolutely *pathetic* he is and how much Airplane would laugh at him for it. He sighs, squares his shoulders, and shakes his head.

“No, thank you, we can go through here.”

Zi-Zhao bows again respectfully. Then she guides them through the gardens.

Shen Yuan has a little more trouble walking along a path that isn't entirely smooth. Chengle has finally let go of his hand, taking advantage of the opportunity to hop from stone to stone without touching the grass, followed by his stuffed tiger, who imitates him. Shen Yuan is a

step behind them, almost tearfully thankful that Chengle's game keeps the walk slow, because right now *he needs* to walk at a slower pace.

It's clear the small group of women are watching him and whispering to each other. Shen Yuan dares a glance in their direction as they approach, noticing how they're looking him up and down. They're all, of course, the absolute standard of beauty; Shen Yuan feels a surreal feeling watching them, as if he's seeing people with filters on in real life. He's certain none of them have pimples or large pores like Meimei complains about occasionally when she comes over to his house for skincare routine and *he* tries out a bunch of name-brand products.

Despite this, Shen Yuan can *recognize* certain features: one of them has a long shock of golden hair, so she's that Tangled rip-off wife; another has pale, almost silver eyes, a cultivator with the gift of reading the stars; Shen Yuan finds he remembers more of them than would be pleasant, wincing in embarrassment and hurrying after Chengle.

He asks to sit halfway down the corridor from the garden again, his heart still racing. Zi-Zhao fans him again, and for the next corridor where Shen Yuan needs to sit down for another moment, Shen Yuan politely asks to borrow her fan, which she does so, allowing Shen Yuan to fan himself, trying to catch his breath without feeling ridiculous about being fanned.

“We’re so close!” says Chengle, clearly nervous. He hops in place, but also wrings out his sleeves and moves from side to side. It almost looks like a pee-pee dance, except Shen Yuan has already asked, and the boy has denied it twice. “I like the garden up ahead. It’s pretty. It has a fish pond! But I’m scared to go near it. But Mom feeds the fish for me. I wanted ducks, but Mom says the fish might eat the ducks...”

Chengle rambles on for a bit. He rambles nervously, and when they reach the next garden, Shen Yuan finds it's a bit smaller but cozy, with red-leaved trees full of strong, low branches that a child like Chengle would surely enjoy climbing. It has its own little pond with its bridge, bushes with bright flowers and fruits, patches of trimmed grass, and stone benches. Chengle hums on, talking a little to Shen Yuan and a little to Dawang Tiger, muttering about all sorts of things. Zi-Zhao has his gentle expression on her face, not at all bothered whenever they interrupt each other, and if Shen Yuan had any gold in this world, he wouldn't mind tipping her for good service.

The garden isn't empty. However, when Shen Yuan notices it, it's because he's hit by something that hits his legs like a tiny wrecking ball, so hard that he has to hold onto his cane with both hands to keep from falling.

Then the thing *bites*.

“*A-SHAO!”* Shen Yuan hears a shrill, feminine voice. He ducks his head, noticing a mass of dark curls sprouting from one side of her head. On the other side, there’s a little bun of hair, and clinging to his legs and thankfully biting at his robes, which don’t tear, the girl dressed in a pretty red dress stares at Shen Yuan with large, dark eyes. “COME HERE *NOW*!”

The woman who springs up like a flower from the bushes is none other than Sha Hualing. Her face isn't that far from the fanart Shen Yuan has seen, and being married definitely hasn't changed her way of dressing at all, because Shen Yuan sees so much exposed skin that he

turns his head away, finding that looking at the little girl who keeps trying to bite his leg is much better than seeing so much... skin.

“No,” the girl says stubbornly. She *really* does have sharp-looking fangs. “Mama, no!! Shaoshao no!! Shaoshao hunting!”

Then, too, from a ferocious Chengle: “Shao-mei! It’s *my* Baba Yuan! Let him *go*!”

The little girl is no more than three years old. That doesn't make her any less fierce when, clearly recognizing her brother's voice, she leaps to her feet and charges straight at him with a short-legged stride that almost makes her seem to be waddling from side to side as she runs.

“Don’t let her bite your sweater!” Shen Yuan begs, watching as the little girl, instead of lunging to bite him as he expected, lunges at Chengle, climbing him like a giant koala, trying to bite his cheek.

“*YOU WENT!”* the girl squeals, indignant. She’s not pouting or crying the way Shen Yuan has grown accustomed to Chengle’s reaction. In fact, she’s pulling Chengle’s hair, messing it up. “Far! Far! And you not take Shaoshao with you!! Bad Gege! *Bad*!”

Shen Yuan sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose as he turns around. He doesn't even flinch when he sees Sha Hualing standing beside him, almost as if she's sniffing at him. He's unsure of what protocols would be appropriate to use, so he settles for a respectful bow and saying, “A pleasure to meet you, Saintess Sha.”

“So, *it’s you*,” Sha Hualing says, walking around him. Silver accessories jingle with every step she takes. She casts a look of clear intent at the servant, who, after a deep bow, leaves the way she came. *Ah*. Shen Yuan didn’t even get to say goodbye or thank her. Sha Hualing continues examining him, walking in circles around him. “*Wow*, that hair. And you’re shorter than this Lingling thought. Are the men in your world shorter, or just *you*? Weren’t you fed well? You are this Lingling height.”

“Eh,” Shen Yuan shifts uncomfortably. Sha Hualing pulls his cane, stealing it.

“Your weapon is strange,” she says, playing with the cane in her hands. She holds it like a sword and grimaces, wrinkling her nose. “It’s *not* a weapon.”

“It is not,” Shen Yuan confirms, holding out his hand for Sha Hualing to take it back. She does, snorting. “I need it to walk. Some days more than others.”

The little girl, perched on Luo Chengle’s back, shrieks shrilly, “YOU LOST A LEG?!” Right after, she jumps off his back, running over to look at him more closely. Chengle, sitting on the grass, his hair disheveled, pouts. “Shaoshao see!?”

“Rude girl,” Sha Hualing said, bending down and lifting her onto her hip. The girl squirms, but Sha Hualing’s grip is firm. “The number of legs people have is none of your problem. Apologize.”

“Shao-mei is rude,” says Chengle, who now seems to want to hang on to Shen Yuan as if he too wants to climb into his arms. Shen Yuan knows he’s already going to be in a lot of pain, so a little more pain, in comparison… “Baba Yuan isn’t lost a leg! He uses a cane because it hurts him not to use it.”

“*Two* legs! Shaoshao still say sorry?” the girl asks her mother as Shen Yuan bends down, carrying Chengle, who climbs onto him and clings to his hold. *He’s* much heavier and harder to hold, and Shen Yuan wonders how much pain it will be for his muscles to do any kind of physical activity that would allow him to continue carrying his child for any length of time.

Sha Hualing pinches the girl's cheek. "Yes, you bit someone without asking, and you were a rude little girl. Apologize."

“Ima-so-sorryyy,” the little girl says, pouting like a baby. Her cheeks are puffy. “Shaoshao no mean rude little girl. Shaoshao just wanna hunt!!”

“And you hunted,” Sha Hualing says, pinching her chubby cheek. “A brother and a human. This mother of yours call that a successful hunt, fierce girl.”

The little girl lets out a loud laugh, clapping her hands in the air. Shen Yuan finds himself smiling, unable to stop himself from doing so when the little girl's laughter is absolutely contagious.

“So, this is your Shao-mei,” he says to Chengle, and the boy nods. “She really does bite everything.”

“Everything!” Chengle protests. Sha Hualing lets out a laugh. Her laughter jingles like the silver hanging from each of her accessories. “My toys and swords and books. And paintbrushes.”

Little A-Shao sticks her tongue out at Chengle. Then, she begins to wriggle out of her mother's arms to get off, and Sha Hualing takes advantage of being caught to fix her hair by tying her loose curls into another bun.

“Help me with this,” she demands of Shen Yuan, holding out her wrist. Shen Yuan unties one of the red ribbons on her arm so Sha Hualing can use it to finish tying the girl’s hair, which is twitching and making the hairstyle worse. “Seriously, brat! Stop or this mother of yours would bite you!”

“Mom, nooo!” the little girl squeals, but stays still. Sha Hualing finishes tying her hair and then sets her down on the ground, where the little girl runs off with that short-legged gait, landing on her tummy after a stumble. She gets up and keeps running as if the thump hadn't even hurt.

Chengle pulls on Shen Yuan's robe collar.

“Baba Yuan,” he protests, and Shen Yuan realizes he’s been staring at the little savage child too much. “Baba Yuan, just stay with me,” the boy practically orders. Shen Yuan sighs.

“Of course,” he says, and kisses his forehead gently. “Don’t you want me to tie your hair with a lace too?”

Chengle shakes his head.

“I don’t want to play,” he pouts as he watches A-Shao chase Dawang Tiger, who runs at full speed to escape her tiny hands and exposed teeth. “I want to see Mom.”

“And you won’t say hello to this Lingling, huh, you little brat?” Sha Hualing says. Shen Yuan almost gasps when Sha Hualing carelessly drops down against him to pinch Chengle’s cheeks, who squeals and squirms. “You better have hunted a lot of humans with those clawless little hands of yours. This Lingling won’t let you come back to play with your siblings if you haven’t come back with a good hunt and lots of stories.”

Luo Chengle pouts plaintively. Still, he lets Sha Hualing pinch his cheeks, and when she pulls him into her arms, Chengle lets himself be carried. Shen Yuan tries to make his exhalation of relief less obvious.

“Look at you, you’re so tall, little brat,” Sha Hualing complains, running her hands over the boy’s cheeks, his back, and his hair, as if her own hands wanted to reassure themselves that the child in her arms was real and there. For a long moment, Shen Yuan felt a strange sense of dissonance as he tried to connect the character he’d read about with the woman who now had a sweet smile on her red-painted mouth and dark eyes that, far from being a sadistic and overbearing demon, could only reveal a woman who could almost be described as caring. “Aren’t you going to give this Lingling a big hug, eh?”

The boy grimaces, but still hugs Sha Hualing. Shen Yuan watches with a warm heart as the hug grows longer, with his little Chengle nestled in the strong arms and rocked from side to side. Shen Yuan doesn't even care how much skin Sha Hualing is showing now, because Chengle seems content to receive such a warm hug, and as long as he is comfortable and happy, Shen Yuan will accept anything.

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

Sha Hualing is a wild and rather chaotic thing. She leaves Shen Yuan sitting on a stone bench with Chengle in his arms and chases her slithering three-year-old daughter around the garden before catching her and hoisting her over her shoulder like a sack of rice. She now redoes the undone bun on the opposite side to the one she just fixed, which seems to be a constant habit. Only when Chengle seems to go from nervous to downright tense does Shen Yuan take a deep breath and say, “Saintess Sha, excuse me for interrupting. But Chengle would like to see his mother.”

Sha Hualing gives Chengle a look that could almost be warm. Then she grabs her daughter by the ankles, once again carrying her like a sack over her shoulder, and to the echo of the child's laughter, Sha Hualing simply says, "So what are you waiting for? Chengle knows where his mother is."

It's a little difficult to get Chengle out of his arms now that he's found comfort. He's somewhere between chewing on his thumbnail and almost having his thumb in his mouth,

like those times when his kid used to hide behind comforting childish movements to cope with stressful situations. Shen Yuan has a hell of a time standing up with a heavy child in his arms, but standing up is the worst: he's rested his legs a bit, so it's not hard for him to walk out of the garden.

“You have to show me the way,” he politely asks Chengle. “Is that okay? I have no idea where we’re going, and Saintess Sha scared our servant away.”

Chengle doesn't laugh at his bad joke. He hides further and just points his little hand in one direction. Shen Yuan sighs, walking down a covered, lighted hallway, and when they're about to turn, they bump into another child.

“Didi,” the boy says, his eyes wide and surprised at seeing Chengle. He’s about two years older than Chengle, a little taller, with straight, jet-black hair in many braids that fall over his shoulders. He wears red robes, and his small hands, tipped with sharp black nails, hold a rag doll; if Shen Yuan can guess from the number of bite marks all over the doll, it’s probably A-Shao’s. “You’re back.”

Chengle doesn't respond verbally. His son makes a sound that sounds neither like a greeting nor acknowledgment, hiding even further in Shen Yuan. He accommodates him as best he can on his hip.

“Chengle’s a little nervous,” Shen Yuan hums, tilting his head toward the boy. “You must be his An-ge?”

The boy nods. Shen Yuan has no idea how such a calm and gentle child came from someone like Sha Hualing, but in reality, seeing A-Shao, he can easily believe that savagery is something that comes from women of the demon type Sha Hualing is.

…Actually, it’s not a bad theory at all.

“This is Prince Luo Anhe,” he says, bowing deeply and respectfully. His expression is calm and serious, even as he says, “Senior must be Noble Consort Shen.”

“Oh, no, *I’m not* a consort,” Shen Yuan repeats. Chengle makes a strangled sound, *clearly* annoyed, so Shen Yuan rocks him a little in his arms. “Not really. Just… you can call me, well, Young Master Shen? The servant, Zui-Zhao, called me that, so… I guess it’s okay?”

Anhe shrugs. He tilts his head.

“This one will take Shaoyu her doll,” the boy says, with his gentle calmness. “She lost it and now she is restless.”

“Oh, is that why she is acting like that?” Shen Yuan hadn’t believed the girl’s wild behavior was… just restless. Anhe nods, and Shen Yuan guesses the boy must know his little sister better.

“An honor to meet you, Young Master Shen. Excuse me,” and the boy bids farewell with another respectful bow, walking off with the doll in his hand, his stride firm and his back

straight, like a tiny soldier.

Shen Yuan watches his step for a moment, with a lot of doubts that he isn't exactly sure he can formulate, but Chengle tugs at the collar of his robe, and Shen Yuan returns his attention to his child.

“Did the mice get your tongue?” he says, and Chengle, still holding his thumb more in his mouth than just biting his nail, shakes his head. Shen Yuan sighs, kissing his forehead lovingly. “Okay, just keep leading me, darling. I won’t leave your side for even a moment. I promise.”

Chengle points down the next hallway to the right, the same place Anhe came from. Shen Yuan notices that the little boy becomes even more tense as they cross the corridor, so he suspects they must be close. Only when they reach a double set of doors halfway down the corridor and Shen Yuan can smell a strong scent of incense and floral oils does Chengle shift uncomfortably, hiding his small face against his neck. Shen Yuan takes a deep breath, holding the boy who's perched on him like a mute koala, nervous and tense, working up the courage to knock on the door.

There is no reply. Shen Yuan tries again, and again. Chengle grows more tense with each attempt, his breathing becoming faster and faster. Shen Yuan takes a deep breath, determined to enter as impolitely uninvited if necessary, when just—

"Come in."

The voice that reaches him from inside the room is low, soft. It's almost the voice of a ghost. Shen Yuan opens the door and enters with the firmest steps he can take.

The room has large windows with gauze curtains. It's not so bright despite that; all the room is filled with gauze curtains hanging on the walls and the bed canopy, silks and fabrics in every corner, and on the bed, staring blankly at a wall, the only woman in the room has long, ink-black hair draped over white robes, pale, bony hands folded in her lap. Shen Yuan feels as if, between the pallor and the thinness that seems to consume her, he is seeing a ghost. Liu Mingyan doesn't even have a veil over her face, and Shen Yuan forces himself not to look directly at her face out of respect.

Only when Liu Mingyan doesn’t look up does Shen Yuan realize he *should* say something. He can’t even fathom what it would be proper to call Liu Mingyan. Sha Hualing had been acknowledged as a Saintess before she became a wive, but wouldn’t calling her Wife Liu be something… *derogatory*? Like, taking away part of her identity as a person and reducing her to just a wife. And they weren’t even acquaintances that he could call Mingyan, beyond letters—maybe just, Lady Liu, or just Liu Mingyan?

And then, his baby's soft voice comes back to say, “*Mom*?”

Liu Mingyan turns around, her face pale and the sound is as if someone had punched her. Shen Yuan forces himself to look away, but even he isn't quick enough to miss Liu Mingyan's eyes, which are shining brightly and brimming with tears.

“Chengle” and she, in movements that seem robotic, moves across the room. Chengle clings more to Shen Yuan, trembling. “Chengle. Oh, my treasure. Are you *real*?”

Chengle doesn't reply. Shen Yuan clears his throat slightly, struggling to breathe and not sound choked.

“We came to visit,” he says, avoiding Liu Mingyan’s face. It feels even worse than looking at a fragment of Sha Hualing’s exposed skin. Seriously, awkward, *awkward*! “Chengle wanted to… see you.”

Chengle trembles a little more in his arms. Shen Yuan can easily guess that the trembling is sobbing.

“My little treasure,” Liu Mingyan said, reaching out for Chengle. Her hands hovered there, floating in the air, not even touching him. “My heart. I missed you so much.”

Chengle seems hesitant. His little voice says, “Did Mom miss me?”

“Every day,” Mingyan whispers. Shen Yuan feels a warm relief when the boy loosens his grip on his neck. When Liu Mingyan moves closer, Chengle doesn’t resist her touch, practically lunging at her in a crushing grip. Shen Yuan loses his balance slightly, gripping his cane so tightly it hurts from his wrist to his elbow, but reaching out in concern to Liu Mingyan, who also seems to be struggling to stay on his feet.

She steadies herself on her feet, though. She tightly hugs the shivering, crying child to her shoulder, babbling nonsense, and only when Shen Yuan risks a glance in Liu Mingyan's direction does he see her mouth moving again and again without making a single sound. He worries for a moment, but then discovers that she, voiceless, is repeating "*thank you, thank you, thank you*" over and over again.

Now, it is Shen Yuan who steps forward and places his hand on his child's back, rubbing it reassuringly, allowing his sweet son to shed all his tears in his mother's arms, without leaving his side as he promised.

Chapter End Notes

LBH: Prepare the room next to mine in the imperial chambers
Demon servants: ????? HAS JUNSHANG ALREADY NAMED AN EMPRESS???? WHEN????? I MISSED THE CORONATION BY TAKING A WEEK'S VACATION NO WAY

Everyone in the damn palace: Noble Consort Shen...
SY: NO, YOU ARE ALL WRONG, WHO LIED TO YOU LIKE THAT?
LBH: *whistles indifferently*

Guys. GUYS. I cried at the Mingyan+Chengle reunion. Literally. I DIDN'T CRY WRITING IT, WHICH IS SURPRISING, but I cried editing the chapter. It tore me apart. I don't regret anything
Also, this chapter was going to be *the thing* you know it was supposed to be, but aha, Sha Hualing showed up and she and her daughter hijacked my chapter, and then things happened, and I decided to split the chapter into two. I'd say I don't regret much about it either because what's more fun than more Luo babies for Shen Yuan to adore? (Chengle won't be too happy with that for now, but he can TOLERATE IT...)

Demon-Sha-girls: wild little devil
Demon-Sha-boys: sweet, sweet little bun

Shen Yuan got a glimpse of the wives, and MOST OF ALL, THE WIVES GOT A GLIMPSE OF SHEN YUAN..... HEHEHEHE.....
fan.exe has been acquired oh, oh, what do we have here? :P

I find it funny that the underground palace is a subterranean thing, which, in parallel with the Emperor's harem being called flowers, is basically a massive greenhouse with glass roofs that emulate the skies of the outside world and maintain a perpetual comfortable climate suited to the comfort of the respective wives. Just as there are autumn gardens, there are even spring and winter gardens, completely oblivious to the weather outside. Some wives might only be aware of what time of year it is thanks to festivals :P
I love developing PIDW's silly worldbuilding. It's one of my favorite things, so Cucumber-bro can't insult me for it (he can for impregnating him countless times over the plot in different fics, but I deserve it)

ANYWAY. THESE HAREM CHAPTERS (PLURAL) WILL BE A BIT LONG. Then we'll get back to the slice of life. I love harem dramas and I can't help myself, I'm so sorry
I HOPE YOU REALLY LIKED THIS CHAPTER!!! THANK YOU SO, SO MUCH FOR READING!!! I genuinely enjoyed writing this one (the almost 8k reads show that). I have nothing but thanks for all the huge, great, and absolute support and love I'm getting from you. THANK YOU
You know!! Kudo-comment-interaction, let's have fun together with silly theories about what's going to happen in Shen Yuan's little harem adventure ;3 Did you or didn't you guess what would happen in the 28th, now 29th, aka 28th Part 2? We'll find out... on Sunday!!!
See you soon! :D

Chapter 29: Second steps to starting a family

Chapter Notes

HOW DID YOU SURVIVE LIKE THE 15 HOURS OUR HUSBAND AO3 WAS AWAY? HUGS TO ALL OUR ALMOST-WAR WIDOWS, SURVIVORS, THAT'S WHAT WE ARE

My sister got the scoop on this chapter because I made her my beta reader (she pretends to correct what she reads and I pretend to believe her, anyway, it's a huge help for these longer chapters because my depression will be good for writing a lot, but BAD for maintaining attention and being able to correct things after writing them), and she did this immediately after reading it and just, please, I'm freaking out, it's AWESOME

AGAIN!! Huge thanks to Ksye for the Luo Babies' names :3
In this chapter, we have:
- Yaozuo - 瑶 (yáo) "precious jade" and 佐 (zuǒ) "assist, aid"
- Shuwei - 淑 (shū) "good, pure, virtuous, charming" and 伟 (wěi) "great, robust, extraordinary"
- Muqian - 穆 (mù) "majestic, solemn, reverent, calm" and 茜 (qiàn) "madder, reeds"
- Fuliang - 富 (fù) "abundant, ample" and 亮 (liàng) "bright, brilliant, radiant"
(although some of them are not mentioned by name, but... well :P I'm introducing them little by little)

OH WELL. Chapter warnings: Shen Yuan™, subtle internalized ableism, harem drama.

Btw, this is the LONGEST chapter so far, with approximately 9900 words :D so, get comfortable and enjoy the chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan keeps his word and doesn't leave Chengle alone for a moment. Liu Mingyan doesn't mind. She seems to hesitate even before speaking, but she listens attentively to everything Chengle says, as if she's trying to memorize his every word.

Chengle speaks. Hesitantly at first. There's still a lot of slightly vacillation around the edges, but like any child who still yearns for their mother's love, it only takes a few gentle words from Mingyan before the boy simply spills the beans about his entire days, about Yanshi and the park, the ducks, the martial arts class, all the gift and Christmas, his new Nainai, Uncles Yue and Jiu-ge, about Ming-ge being so weird and sullen and autistic, and Meimei always taking such great, pretty photos.

Liu Mingyan asks a few questions, but they seem to be more than just incentives to keep her child talking. Shen Yuan sits there on a couch under the window, looking out at a tiny inner

garden that seems to connect directly to another window on the other side of the garden. There's a third window, closed, and judging by its position and location, Shen Yuan wouldn't be surprised if the first three wives shared that little garden. It doesn't look like a bad place for the three women to hang out, if only they could get along—something Sha Hualing at least seemed to have managed to do with Liu Mingyan. He doesn't know much about Ning Yingying, and he doesn't know how reckless it would be to ask.

Sitting helps enough. Even if it might be boring, Shen Yuan is never bored listening to all the things Chengle says. Now, he's talking about how Shen Yuan will get them a new house, and Chengle will have a beautiful room with a huge, empty bookcase that will make everyone want to give him new storybooks. Dawang Tiger jumps up from the floor onto the bed and nods at Liu Mingyan, demanding to be stroked, and Liu Mingyan seems absolutely amazed at the care taken with the details and stitching.

Liu Mingyan doesn't really say much. Her words are measured, gentle. But she's warm. Her hands are constantly touching Chengle, running through his hair, his cheeks, his back, his tiny hands in hers. She can't seem to stop touching him, as if touching him can prove to her that her child is real and there, with her, after so long.

She even seems to have the faintest hint of a smile. Chengle speaks more excitedly than nervously, and in reality, even Shen Yuan is relaxed about it when, abruptly, a loud baby cry is heard from the adjacent wall.

Chengle's expression collapses. He stops mid-speech, and it's clear from his face that he's completely forgotten all the bad feelings his tiny little sister provoked. Liu Mingyan also looks dejected.

“I should…” she says, and Chengle grimaces. Shen Yuan decides to intervene.

“Chengle,” he calls, and the boy looks up at him, his pout beginning to swell. Shen Yuan feels a little sorry for Liu Mingyan, who looks so broken and almost fragile, and how little she needs right now for her boy to burst into tears and call her the horrible things Luo Chengle clearly knows how to say. “Could you do me a huge, huge favor? Please? I’m in… so much pain.”

For once, saying it out loud doesn't feel humiliating. Shen Yuan attributes that to using it as a distraction, and it works, because Chengle jumps out of bed and runs to Shen Yuan, his eyes wide and worried.

“Baba Yuan shouldn’t,” the boy complains, pouting. Shen Yuan cradles his little face in his hand, sighing.

“I’m sure you know where to find a servant, right?” he asks. The boy nods quickly. “Do you think you can find one to bring Doctor Mu? He must be somewhere in the palace,” or at least, that’s what Mu Qingfang told him in his last letter—that Luo Binghe had arranged (forced) for him an apothecary and workspace where he could read, make medicine, expand his knowledge, and be of service to the imperial wives to pay off his debt or something. Though Luo Binghe had also paid him in gold and silver, plus access to the greenhouses and libraries, so Shen Yuan isn’t entirely sure whether Mu Qingfang is being held captive *against* his will.

“Yes!” the boy says. He gives his mother one last hesitant look before running off at full speed, and Shen Yuan sighs, letting his back relax against the backrest of the couch.

“Thank you,” Liu Mingyan says, standing up. Judging by the way she moves, Shen Yuan is tempted to lend her his cane, but he doesn’t know if she might consider it mockery or insult. “He’s… so emotional and fragile.”

“He is,” Shen Yuan says, rubbing his face. Liu Mingyan walks with small but slightly firmer steps to another door that clearly leads to an adjoining room, returning with a crying baby in his arms.

Chenxue has a thick shock of dark hair, her face flushed from crying, and she huddles hungrily against her mother as soon as Liu Mingyan settles into bed. Shen Yuan finds it absolutely fascinating to find out whether the grass in the inner garden is normal grass or has some kind of special PIDW property once Liu Mingyan starts rearranging his robes. The last thing he wants to do is disrespect the poor woman, who must already be suffering a terrible time.

“Careful, little princess,” Liu Mingyan says gently. Then she sighs. “Her teeth have started to grow. She’s a little… rough.”

“Is she in a lot of pain?” Shen Yuan asks, immediately thinking he could send her some cold bites or some other teething aids. He immediately wants to bang his forehead on the windowsill. Really, what's wrong with him? Is he going to go crazy for every child in this damn palace? He's already added hair scrunchies for A-Shao to his mental shopping list, and he has no idea what Anhe would like yet, but…

“She’s in a bit,” Liu Mingyan says, her voice fragile like a ghost. “Sometimes more than others. She’s had a fever these days, which isn’t normal for her… blood. Mu-shishu said…” and she sounds even more fragile saying this, “that feeding on me would boost her *defenses* and help with the fever.”

Shen Yuan appreciates having absolute confirmation that Mu Qingfang has indeed read and trusted all the books he sent for him. Neither of them says anything after that. Shen Yuan continues to look out at the gardens, allowing Liu Mingyan as much privacy as he can. They stand there for a long, silent moment, and just as Shen Yuan is considering whether he should ask or say something, Liu Mingyan says,

“You’ve… taken good care of him,” her voice fragile, almost ethereal, as she seems to spill the words as if they were tears. “He… He’s so happy. In all those paintings. He looks happy, and now I see him, and he’s grown so much. My little treasure is like a small tree that couldn’t grow when the taller trees around it robbed it of the strength of the earth and the warmth of the sun. Now it’s been replanted in a place with more light and better soil, where it’s been able to take root and grow stronger than ever. Now, he’s *safe*. I will be in debt on you for the rest of my life.”

“No, no, not at all,” Shen Yuan shakes his head. Although Liu Mingyan’s shocked words make his emotions somewhat unsettled, Shen Yuan must be clear on his point. “Chengle… I love him. And I consider him my son, too. I know that… that it’s not that long that he’s been

with me, and I don’t really have any rights over him other than my love. But, that’s all. I love him. He’s my baby, too. I would do anything for him.” And he sighs, deeply, letting go of his nerves and anxiety. Being Chengle’s father is what he does best, and it’s not difficult for him to relax into that. “There’s no debt. I want his happiness, and his happiness means having *all* of his parents with him. All the people he loves and who love him in his life. That’s all I want.”

Shen Yuan hears a sound almost like sobbing. He doesn't feel brave enough to turn around.

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By the time Chengle returns, almost dragging a worried Mu Qingfang with him, Liu Mingyan has already finished feeding her daughter, and the baby is now wide awake, sitting up in bed with a rag doll in her hands, squeezing and unsqueezing it; she, too, seems to be looking at everything with curiosity. She's an adorable baby, Shen Yuan thinks, and he avoids looking at her as much as possible in Chengle's presence.

“So, you’ve come,” Mu Qingfang says, smiling at him. He looks at least a little more rested than the last time Shen Yuan saw him, and his short hair is tied back in a tiny, high bun.

“Just visiting,” Shen Yuan hums, and Mu Qingfang’s expression is *almost* relieved. “We won’t be staying long.”

“A short visit sounds appropriate,” Mu Qingfang says. Shen Yuan doesn’t miss the way he says ‘short,’ as if he’s anxious that Shen Yuan stay too much time in the palace. To be honest, Shen Yuan doesn’t have much desire to hang around for that long either. “Let’s hope that next time we can meet be in a situation that doesn’t warrant medical treatment.”

“I’d like to treat you to tea sometime,” Shen Yuan hums, delighted at the prospect. He’s never had many friends, but he thinks he can perhaps be Mu Qingfang’s friend… in a way.

He lets Mu Qingfang examine him, his hands on his wrist, the cool qi circulating in his veins. Chengle has sat down beside him, rocking himself in a way that seems worried, and while Shen Yuan is a little pained to worry his little boy, the fact is that he's in the same room as his little sister without making a face, and that's a great advantage.

“There’s general inflammation,” Mu Qingfang says, continuing his examination. “It’s normal for a fever to appear throughout the day if the inflammation progresses. Has Shen Gongzi been overexerting himself lately?”

“The palace is very big,” Shen Yuan sighs, allowing himself to feel a little dejected. “I had to cross two gardens and an infinite number of corridors to get here. Let alone return.”

Mu Qingfang hums. If he notices that the muscles in his arms are as sore as those in his legs and casts a glance or two at the child almost climbing onto his lap, at least he doesn't say anything. Shen Yuan silently thanks him. Mu Qingfang actually seems to be quite sensitive to the small things he should or shouldn't mention out loud.

The pain is far more than just tolerable. It's the kind of pain that, if he were to experience in his own home, would probably throw him into bed and make him cry a little. It's also the kind of pain that would make him take four different painkillers, a large electrolyte drink, and rock himself in bed for four to six-hour naps, grateful that the pain doesn't accompany him to his sleep. It's not a pain he wants to live with daily.

Mu Qingfang orders him to rest and not make any major movements for the rest of the day. Shen Yuan thinks that his fucking room is on the other side of the enormous palace with a bit of pent-up tears, but he doesn't say so or complain, and Mu Qingfang leaves with the promise of returning with an herbal tea prepared specifically to help him with the inflammation and fever.

Only when Mu Qingfang leaves does Liu Mingyan ask: “Is Noble Consort Shen *still* ill?”

Shen Yuan takes a deep, stressed breath. It's Chengle who answers, "Mom! My Baba Yuan *isn't* a consort!" And to the woman's surprise, her boy launches into a rant about all his Father Emperor’s bad behavior, how he's tried to court him in ugly ways, how he's been rude and mean, and how Shen Yuan has always shown himself capable of putting a stop to him, even hitting him to stop him from saying such nonsense. Also, if his Father Emperor wants to marry *his* Baba Yuan, Chengle must allow it, and for Chengle to allow it, Father Emperor needs to earn a lot of marriage points to make him good enough to...

“Chengle,” Shen Yuan almost begged, his face buried in his hands. “*Please*. Seriously, that’s *not* going to happen.”

“It’s not going to happen!” Chengle says, sounding very happy to say it. “Father Emperor will *never* get all those points!”

“It won’t happen because your father doesn’t want to marry me,” Shen Yuan repeats. Liu Mingyan lets out a sound that sounds *almost* mocking, the closest thing to a laugh the woman has made in all this time, and Shen Yuan doesn’t have the face to register it.

“He wants to,” Chengle insists, rocking back and forth with a grimace of annoyance. “He cooks for Baba Yuan, and cleans his house, and gives him presents, and always takes care of him, and is always touching him, and when he cooks they are all the foods Baba Yuan likes, and he makes him lots of Doctor Mu tea so Baba Yuan won’t be in pain, and he looks at him with *that weird* look that I don’t like and says all those things that…”

“*Chengle*,” Shen Yuan insisted. His face was burning, his ears were burning, and he felt absolutely humiliated. This kid…! All those things he’s saying, it’s *definitely* not like that! “That… isn’t like that.”

“Chengle, baobei,” Liu Mingyan’s voice sounds perhaps even livelier, clearly amused as she says, “That’s something that bothers your Baba. Let’s talk about something else.”

Chengle pouts but obeys. Soon, Shen Yuan has rescued the qiankun bag of Chengle's toys and belongings, and the entire room is filled with clearly annoyed by confinement stuffed tigers, stretching, jumping, demanding to be stroked, and examining the place like suspicious cats.

One of the tigers jumps onto the bed near where Chenxue sits, looking curiously at her. The baby reaches out for the tiger, uttering sounds like nonsensical babble, and the tiger comes over, butting its head for petting. Chengle frowns, but says nothing. Shen Yuan quickly turns away his eyes from the baby before Chengle sees him doing so, simply scratching behind the ears of the tiger that has jumped onto his lap.

Mu Qingfang returns a little later. He pours Shen Yuan a herbal tea that tastes frankly worse than all the ones Luo Binghe has been making for him, but it seems to be of a stronger dosage because it relieves the sore feeling in his muscles almost immediately to a much more tolerable level, almost only recognizable as pain when he moves roughly.

Mu Qingfang takes the opportunity to check on aby Chenxue while he's there, checking that her gums aren't swollen and that her temperature is normal, tickling the baby on her tummy as he checks her over. When Mu Qingfang sees the clearly bad look Chengle is giving to him, he reaches out a hand to the child and does a check, from his wrist to the strength of his arms, declaring that he's also very healthy and strong, although he should eat more vegetables and get more sun.

Luo Chengle doesn't throw a tantrum. Shen Yuan figures that as long as his sweet boy doesn't see or feel a major difference between him and the baby he's clearly so jealous of, there won't be a big storm to deal with on the horizon.

Shen Yuan can only be grateful for Mu Qingfang's sensitivity as he leaves.

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Getting to the garden is a bit difficult. Shen Yuan feels like they're being escorted, pursued by a bunch of stuffed tigers who *will have to* take a good bath before returning to their bed in the apartment, who are quickly chased by a wild little A-Shao, now with all her hair loose. Sha Hualing seems simply resigned, flipping over Anhe's shoulder to something the boy is embroidering, calmly unperturbed even by his sister's shrieks.

“Do you like embroidery?” Shen Yuan asks the boy when he takes his place on the bench next to him. Chengle doesn’t seem *so* jealous that he lets him sit there, chasing after A-Shao to keep her from biting his tigers.

Anhe shrugs. He shows him an absolutely beautiful embroidery of a Southern Carnivorous Manticore, a flower that looks exactly like a rose except when it opens to reveal a row of thorns that function as fangs, filled with multi-colored threads.

“I like the colors,” the boy says, showing the large amount of colorful threads he has up his sleeve. “And flowers, especially carnivorous ones. Mom says I'm boring.”

“Hey, brat,” Sha Hualing, sitting on the other side of the boy, tugs at the end of one of his braids. The boy looks at her with an almost scowl. “You make me look like a bad mother, you rascal. I’m not saying *you’re* boring. I’m saying you have hobbies that would bore *me*.”

“That I’m boring, that’s Mother is saying, this one understood clearly” the boy repeats stubbornly, and Sha Hualing snorts. Shen Yuan stops himself from laughing. The boy doesn’t

seem to be doing anything more than have fun at the expense of annoying his mother, because it's clear there's no real offense in the way he speaks. In fact, as Sha Hualing begins to rant about having a child so full of hobbies that she thought meant punishment during her own childhood, the boy has the hint of a subtle smile on his face as he continues embroidering.

Liu Mingyan has sat down by the small pond. Colorful fish, no bigger than a finger, are leaping to the surface, and Shen Yuan recognizes them as Rainbow Betas, beautiful and demonic fish that are quite dangerous to other species, but they live in colorful communities and only eat things the color of their scales, which can be any color of the rainbow. Although he is curious to see them up close, Liu Mingyan has sat down with Chenxue, who is babbling and seemingly trying to crawl on the grass, clapping and chirping, and Shen Yuan will not push his luck. The afternoon has been tantrum-free so far, and Shen Yuan doesn't plan on that changing anytime soon.

Suddenly, A-Shao starts crying at the top of her lungs, and Sha Hualing jumps up, running towards her so fast that Shen Yuan can't even keep up with his eyes. Apparently, the child, in her wild play, has fallen and hit her forehead on a rock, because she is rubbing it while crying. Chengle is carrying her when Sha Hualing arrives to check on her, and when Shen Yuan watches Chengle with his own little frown and his own shining eyes, while he rubs his little sister's forehead, he just... finds it hard to breathe without feeling that he is going to cry too.

"It's weird that Didi doesn't like A-Xue," Anhe says, and Shen Yuan flinches. The boy is also looking in the direction where both Sha Hualing and Chengle are trying to get the disheveled girl to stop crying. The blow must have been hard, and although there's no longer a mark on her forehead, the girl still looks more scared than hurt. "Didi always cared for and loved Shaoyu very much."

"I don't think he doesn't like her," Shen Yuan says, sighing. "I think… he just doesn't like that his mom was so sad after she was born, and without understanding what was happening, he could only blame Chenxue."

He looks over to where Liu Mingyan is sitting. Under the artificial sun, in a climate that almost feels more spring-like than the harsh winter outside, Shen Yuan watches as Liu Mingyan looks thoughtful while Chenxue picks at the grass between her fingers, tugging and pulling at it, laughing as she pulls it out.

"Sounds like something my Didi would think," Anhe hums. Shen Yuan thinks that, for his… eight, nine years?, he's a pretty mature and focused child. A sweet, calm and intelligent little boy. "It was a difficult time. But Yan-niang and Didi are better now. And if they're both better, things can only also get better."

Shen Yuan doesn't hold back. He pats the boy's head, smiling. It's a funny feeling, because even if it's not the same pride he might feel for Chengle, it's something that stings like a sun against his chest. Anhe smiles back, a true good boy, his dark eyes curling into tender crescents.

“Look,” the boy points out, almost putting the embroidery on Shen Yuan’s face. “I use red here, but also pink and coral, and yellow. So they have depth and look like real petals.”

“Wow! That's a smart move! And very pretty to see,” and Shen Yuan pays attention to everything the boy explains about his choice of colors, something very successful as far as Shen Yuan knows, using blues to deepen the greens, and even adding complementary tones to the darker ones to give them depth of tone.

When A-Shao stops crying, Sha Hualing brings her in, curled up in her arms, hiccuping and chewing on one of her mother's silver bracelets. Chengle arrives, and Shen Yuan has no problem pulling the child in for a big, tight hug.

“You’re a awesome big brother,” he hums to the boy, who writhes with laughter when Shen Yuan tickles him. “I’m so proud of you,” he whispers into his hair.

Chengle’s ears and cheeks are bright red, and after A-Shao stops crying and asking for pampering from her mother, Chengle takes the little girl’s hand and they run off to play again.

A time later, Chenxue seems to have fallen asleep using a stuffed tiger as a pillow and Liu Mingyan seems to be more asleep than awake, and Sha Hualing warns Anhe to look after his little sister so she can help Liu Mingyan get back to the room with the baby. Chengle, without wasting a second, runs to give his mother a hug, which she returns, saying that she’s going to take a short nap but that they can read a book together later if he wants, and Chengle nods before going back to playing.

Shen Yuan is a little relieved, if he's honest with himself. He allows himself to relax, opening the fan Zi-Zhao has given him, a small, even cheap-looking paper and wood fan. It's comfortable to have, and it helps cool him down. It's already past noon, and he's starting to get a little hungry, and Chengle is sure to be a little hungry too. He has no idea if there's a dining room they can go to, or how they'll even get there…

In fact, he is so absorbed in his thoughts that when he hears the first voices, the children are actually already there in the gardens.

There are four children. The one in the lead is clearly the oldest, and Shen Yuan recognizes him with a lurch.

“Oh, no,” Anhe says, grimacing. He puts aside his embroidery and seems to hold his small needle as if ready to throw it like a dart if necessary. Shen Yuan feels slightly sickened that such a calm child like Anhe’s first reaction to seeing another child even close is so violent. “It’s Yaozuo.”

Luo Yaozuo is twelve at most. He looks a little older than the nightmare Shen Yuan saw, but he still has baby fat in his cheeks, making his face look more childish than youthful, even though it's clear he's leaving childhood behind. The only thing that hasn't changed is the furious determination in his eyes.

What has changed is that the sword on his hip doesn't look like wood now.

Shen Yuan takes up his cane, ready to have a few words with the boy as soon as he approaches Chengle, but after brushing him off with a look of contempt, the boy simply grimaces and leads the other children after him. They are also dressed in pale yellow, none of them older than ten. The third boy following behind is clearly Anhe's age, perhaps even months younger, because his legs are shorter and his gait more ungainly.

"Let's train," the boy barks the order. And just like a miniature Emperor, the other children obey. They draw their wooden swords and begin attacking each other. Shen Yuan watches them from behind his fan, his brow furrowed. Well, *he* doesn't really know much about martial arts, but it's impossible not to know absolutely nothing as Ming-ge's brother. Clearly, the children seem more desperate to put on a show.

Soon, it becomes clear *why*.

“No,” Yaozuo says, and both children freeze. The third child stands like a statue, firm, though restless, wearing pale orange robes. “Are you idiots? You’re doing it *wrong*.”

Both boys look at Yaozuo and bow shakily. Yaozuo steals one of the wooden swords, pushing one of the boys aside and taking his place. Shen Yuan watches as the boy explains to them—good, he has to admit, albeit in a rude and insult-filled way—calling them everything from fools to pathetic children. And when his younger brother steps forward to attack him with what Yaozuo has just explained, Yaozuo has no problem throwing him fiercely away.

“You go next,” he orders the next child.

“But Shuwei hasn’t…” and the boy looks at the other boy in yellow, who seems to be just getting up. Apparently, looking at him with concern is the wrong thing to do, because when he looks back at Yaozuo, he squeals as the boy points the wooden sword right at his face.

“*You go next*,” Yaozuo repeats, as a threat.

The boy picks up the wooden sword from the floor and gets into position. A couple of blows later, he, too, struggles to his feet. He looks a little more battered than the other boy in yellow, and Shen Yuan feels a sick feeling in his stomach. Both boys have dark, intense, and scared eyes, but when Yaozuo starts growling indications at them about everything they've done wrong, they almost look as if… as if they really *expected* more approval from the boy.

Shen Yuan feels dizzy.

“Baba Yuan?” And Chengle is there, suddenly. His big eyes are even more scared, and Shen Yuan is sure it’s because without other children to keep hitting, Yaozuo’s eyes have strayed to him more than once. “I’m hungry. Can we go?”

“Sure,” Shen Yuan says automatically. Then he looks at Anhe. “Do you want to join us? Well, you and A-Shao. I don’t have any food, but if we go for something from the kitchens or else, I can share some dessert with you later.”

The boy seems interested. He nods, tucking his embroidery into his sleeve, and runs with his back straight to find Shaoyu, who is now frolicking and growling with stuffed tigers. Shen

Yuan can see the younger boy, with his eager eyes and orange robes, looking at one of the tigers with curiosity, biting his lip and rocking back and forth, as if he's restraining himself from getting closer. He doesn't look like a bad child, just one with bad company.

Chengle doesn't seem bothered that Shen Yuan invited Anhe with them. When the boy returns with his little sister perched on his back like a koala, clearly tempted to eat something sweet later, Chengle tugs at Anhe's hand and starts talking in a low, eager voice about the desserts at his new home, telling him he's going to really like the mochi, and telling him how they have a drawer in the kitchen just for storing all those boxed meals full of sugar and unhealthy things that are delicious. He also tells him about colorful jellies, and Anhe seems genuinely interested in this as they walk.

Shen Yuan feels as if he's herding tigers. He calls them with a whistle, and the stuffed tigers rush after them. Dawang Tiger trots along playfully, bumping his head against Chengle's legs as they go, and Shen Yuan is *almost* certain they'll be able to leave the garden without any childish drama when, almost like a paralyzing chill, a sensation runs through him like an electric shock right from his stomach. Shen Yuan backs away, almost driven by a fierce survival instinct that makes the hair on the back of his neck stand up and practically compels him to act—and just in time because a sword blade flies *exactly* where he had been.

The sword plunges into a tree a little further away, with such force that the blow makes the tree shake violently, a sound similar to an axe blow that makes brown and reddish leaves rain down.

Shen Yuan turns his face to see the child Luo Yaozuo staring at him.

“You,” the boy says. His hand is outstretched, and with a single flick of his wrist, the sword comes back toward him. *It’s* a shining spirit sword that travels the path back without difficulty, and Shen Yuan might admire it if he hadn’t come too close to being impaled *by a damn twelve-year-old.* Shen Yuan forces himself to breathe, dizzy. “Who are you, and why are you in *my* garden?”

“It’s not your garden,” Luo Anhe says, taking a step back. Both of his hands grip Shaoyu’s arms, keeping the girl clinging to him. Also, Shen Yuan notes, Anhe is shielding Chengle from Yaozuo’s view with his body. “It’s the garden of the main wives, their children, and Father Emperor.”

“*This one* is the eldest son,” the boy hisses, looking at Anhe with disdain. “You dare speak to the First Prince like that, you-…?”

“Yes,” Anhe says, cutting him off firmly. “You dare attack Noble Consort Shen? Father Emperor *won’t* like that.”

Shen Yuan clings to his cane to keep from collapsing under the weight of his own shame.

“*Noble* Consort Shen?” Yaozuo says, and he looks at Shen Yuan with a contempt no child has looked at him with since he was in middle school. Oh well. Shen Yuan isn’t surprised that his poor boy was actually terrified of this big bully. Then the boy’s smile spreads like a mocking mask, and Shen Yuan is certain he’ll walk out of that damned garden with a terrible

headache. “This prince didn’t know that Father Emperor had the mercy in his heart to accept dishonored consorts, especially with a title so… unbecoming for someone of his ilk. But since he has brought a dishonored doctor for that *wife* who lost her soul… Tell me, *Consort* Shen, are you lost? Because, as Prince Anhe says, this garden belongs to the *imperial family,* to the principal wives and *their* children. What are you doing strolling here when you are *nothing of the sort*?”

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath. On the one hand, *wow*. He hasn't had a kid decide to tease him since he was in school. On the same hand, he's not going to stop to his level. He's a *kid*, for God's sake, and if anyone's going to respond with foul language, it won't be him but his mother and his *damned father*, whom Shen Yuan will surely pull on his ears to make sure he enforces some healthy damn discipline and correct the brat's temper.

On the other hand, that kid made Chengle cry many times in the past and *just* insulted his mother.

Shen Yuan cannot forgive that.

“If these gardens belong to the imperial family, why does Prince Yaozuo behave as if he were a cruel, despotic emperor, beating and injuring his brothers as if they didn't belong here?” he asks. The boy’s expression turns sour, but Shen Yuan continues. “Is the royal blood that runs through your brothers’ veins any less royal than that which runs through Yaozuo’s own veins? It isn’t, is it? Why does Prince Yaozuo make such a difference?” The boy narrows his eyes, giving him a hostile look. Shen Yuan is undeterred, even as he crosses to stand in front of the boy and reaches out his hand.

The boy looks at his hand as if it were an insult.

“What do *you want?*” he hisses.

“Give me your sword,” Shen Yuan orders. The boy’s eyes widen in fury and indignation, and before he can even manage to say anything, Shen Yuan forces himself to swallow the trembling in his entire body, mimic how Jiu-ge would act in such a situation, and say firmly, “I would like to believe that a young boy as powerful as Prince Yaozuo accidentally *lost control* of his spirit sword and did not *intentionally throw it* at an unarmed person weaker than him. I mean, wouldn’t it be *a dishonor* to the prince if it were said that he attacked someone just for the hell of it, in such an irresponsible manner?” And then Shen Yuan looks at the three children, who are staring at him with wide, horrified eyes. “What do you say, kiddos? Did you see Prince Yaozuo lose control of his sword, or did you see him throw it on purpose?”

The three children pale, clearly nervous expressions crossing their little faces. Shen Yuan feels infinitely sorry for them, and is willing to question Anhe about their names and mothers to see if he can get them to talk about… the whole situation. Oh. That headache is really there.

“What did you see, Prince Yaozuo?” Shen Yuan repeats. He doesn’t lower his hand, still waiting for the boy to hand over the sword. “Did they see a prince who lost control of his spirit sword—and now he’ll give it to me, and I’ll give it to someone who can view it and

make sure everything is in order—or did they see a prince who dishonorably attacked someone without a weapon of his own to defend himself and without a reason for the attack whose punishment will be worse than losing his sword for that?"

Luo Yaozuo presses his lips into a thin line. Nearly half a minute of silence later, the boy struggles to wrench the sword, scabbard and all, from his belt, shoving it into Shen Yuan's hand. Shen Yuan realizes a little too late that a sword is pretty damn heavy, but he pretends well that it doesn't weigh too much as he pushes it into his sleeves, relieved when the weight is easily swallowed by the qiankun sleeve.

"The prince has made a wise decision," Shen Yuan hums. The brat snorts, turning away from him. Shen Yuan only raises his voice slightly as he says, "Of course, your actions and decisions will be reported to your Father Emperor. Who else could view the flaws in your spirit sword other than him?"

The boy stands still, almost frozen, for a long moment. He glances over his shoulder at Shen Yuan once, snorts, and turns away. With an indignant expression, he approaches the children. Shen Yuan waves at them with a gentle smile. Only the youngest of the children responds with a broad smile, and he is quickly brought back to a serious expression with an awkward nudge from the boy next to him.

"Give me your sword!" Yaozuo demands of one of the children. "We're not done training yet."

Shen Yuan exhales slowly. He continues on his way, and only when he reaches Chengle does he see the child looking at him with the widest, most amazed eyes in the world. Shen Yuan reaches out to pat his head, and the child seems to break out of his paralysis of horror and fascination, for he throws himself fiercely into his arms.

"Baba is *awesome,*" says Luo Chengle, beaming.

"Noble Consort Shen is smart. I like that," Anhe hums. The girl hanging on his back sticks her tongue out at him as Yaozuo continues to train the children with brutality and bad manners, although with a little more clumsiness due to his bruised ego.

Shen Yuan sighs, rolling his eyes, and they follow the path out of the garden where Anhe leads the way to somewhere they can both get something to eat. Only when they arrive at a dining hall more akin to a communal kitchen—Anhe explains that it is the mothers' responsibility to take their children to eat or provide meals for them in their own pavilions, though his mother always gives them dried game and snacks if they don't want to eat with the other children and avoid problems—with its long wooden tables and benches, does Shen Yuan remind himself that there isn't much of the meals the servants bring that his fragile stomach can handle.

Everything looks spicy, strong, and thick, full of red meats and heavy sauces, and while it doesn't look exactly like Luo Binghe's mouthwatering cooking, it doesn't look *bad either*, which makes his hunger worse.

Shen Yuan has already resigned himself to finding Mu Qingfang to make him another herbal tea to at least fill his stomach a little, even if it's just with liquid, when Anhe—who was telling Chengle about the classes they'd been taking on differentiating between similar types of flowers with very different effects—falls absolutely silent. The only one who squeals is Shaoyu, jumping from the table with her hands and fingers greased with roasted chicken legs, straight to cling to—

"Father Emperor," Chengle says, looking grumpy behind his food. Shen Yuan turns to face Luo Binghe, who has Shaoyu in his arm while the little girl… well. Is biting his hand. "Did you bring food for Baba Yuan? Baba Yuan *can't* eat if he doesn't eat healthy food. And he needs to take his medicine! He can't take medicine if he's not eating anything!"

Shen Yuan looks Luo Binghe up and down. There's something curiously amusing about the man, something infinitely endearing about an Emperor in imperial robes, a heavy belt, and elegant accessories on every imposing part of his body, yet he carries neither a sword nor a banner, but a wild child nibbling at his hand as if it were her favorite chew toy.

Seeing him makes something near Shen Yuan's heart burn a little.

"This Lord brought something to eat," Luo Binghe replies gently. "For Yuan-ge… and for his children as well."

"Can *this one* eat Father Emperor's food too?" Anhe says, his eyes wide with astonishment. Shen Yuan shoots Luo Binghe a venomous look, and Luo Binghe shifts somewhat uncomfortably. It feels a bit like those early days of trial, error, and experimentation. Shen Yuan wonders if Luo Binghe is reverting back to those days as well, remembering the scoldings and demands to be good to Chengle.

Just because these children are not Shen Yuan's doesn't mean that Shen Yuan won't *demand* that Luo Binghe be loving and kind to them as well.

"This Lord has brought enough to share," he says. Only then does Anhe move to make a place next to Shen Yuan and allow Luo Binghe to sit beside him. The girl continues to cling to his arm, nibbling at him. Shen Yuan observes in horror that there is blood in the small wounds.

"Binghe" steps forward, touching the edge of a bleeding wound with small fangs. "You shouldn't let her hurt you, is…"

"It's fine," Luo Binghe says with a smile. He doesn't seem to find the pain or the blood disturbing. "The blood parasites will relieve the pain in her gums. Then, her own blood parasites will consume them and help her grow stronger."

As if to prove it, Shaoyu takes another bite, and lets out another laugh.

"Ba tastes *ewww*" she says but bites him again. "Shaoshao wins! Bite first! Shaoshao wins!"

Luo Binghe has a tender smile on his face. Shen Yuan finds himself mirroring it, unable to understand why Luo Binghe's soft smile makes him smile, unable to comprehend why the

fire in his chest spreads, fierce as if burning through a forest of dry firewood.

Luo Binghe unpacks dumplings in modern, but with talismans, containers. Chengle has no problem replacing his plate of something similar to butter chicken with dumplings, and when Anhe tries them, even the boy is eating with a small smile. Shaoyu is happy to alternate biting his father's hand with stuffing his cheeks with dumplings like an adorable squirrel, and Shen Yuan is warmed to the heart that none of the children seem to want to steal his own soft, fluffy wontons even if they look at his plate curiously. Not even Shaoyu demands a bite or a taste, and even offers Shen Yuan some of his nibbled dumpling, which Shen Yuan feels too weak to refuse.

It's past lunchtime, so it's just them there, and Shen Yuan, between bites, can only catch fire with something burning from his chest to his throat, with an emotion he can't name and a fire that scorches him as Luo Binghe tries, little by little, to be more of a father and less of an Emperor to his children.

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Luo Binghe stays with them for the rest of the afternoon. Back in the gardens, none of the children from Yaozuo's little group are there, although there is a pile of broken wooden swords, so Chengle relaxes and with Anhe and Shaoyu they play a game of throwing a clinking ball (which Shaoyu constantly tries to bite) that changes color each time it hits the ground; apparently, each color means they must use a different body part to throw it, one time it's just their legs, another it's their arms, another it's just an arm once, and it's saved by a kick. They seem entertained, although Anhe proves extremely tired afterward and a little grumpy about having messed up his hair. Shen Yuan can see that he is a rather vain and careful child about his appearance by the way he undoes his messy braids and redoes them with great precision.

Eventually, Shaoyu falls asleep using Shen Yuan's knee as a pillow, and Sha Hualing comes to get her a little while later. They have a whispered conversation with Luo Binghe that Shen Yuan doesn't strain to hear, too relaxed under the shade of one of those red-leafed trees. The air smells clean, and even if it's unnatural, even if it's a harsh winter outside, even if the red skies of the combined kingdoms are burning outside… at that very moment, Shen Yuan is more drowsy than awake, feeling an absolute and strange peace.

Although sleeping with a trunk as a pillow probably isn't the best option, because when he wakes up a while later, his neck is so sore that Luo Binghe has to rush to his aid, injecting small doses of qi and a massage that sets his nerves on edge and relieves the immediate pain. After another while of playing, Sha Hualing disappears back into the pavilion and reappears with Liu Mingyan, who sits near them. Luo Binghe goes to her, and they exchange a few words as well, and Sha Hualing remains seated next to Shen Yuan, looking at him with a wicked smile.

“What?” Shen Yuan says, touching his face. “Is there something on my face?”

“You rascal,” Sha Hualing says, a wildly amused grunt in the tone of her voice. “Taking that sword away from the kid. Who would have thought a frail human could have *so much* guts?”

Shen Yuan feels his ears burning.

“Were you there?” he hisses, embarrassed. Sha Hualing gives him a wide, radiant smile.

“It was a fluke,” Sha Hualing hums playfully. “This Lingling heard the big sword smash, and she was curious but ah-ah, you had the situation so well under control, you little human. Ah, really, that brat of Xiao Gongzhu, he’ll bite off more than he can chew one day and *get crushed.*”

“He’s just a child,” Shen Yuan says, sighing. Despite everything, he feels… so sorry for him. “It’s not his fault he’s the way he is.”

“Of course *not*,” Sha Hualing says, grimacing with a fang-baring grin. “That mother of him. Poisonous as one of the worst flowers in the Endless Abyss, indeed. Spoiled and despotic, she’s done the *worst* to that kids of hers, and she pays so little attention to that little girl of hers that she might as well be a exhibition doll.”

Then, she leans closer to his shoulder, whispering softly: “Did you know that she got pregnant right after Elder-Sister Qin lost her baby? She wanted to blame me, but this Lingling would *never* dare.” Sha Hualing clicks her tongue. Her mouth is set in a sneer as she spouts the harem gossip that Shen Yuan is roughly familiar with, but not from this perspective. “This Lingling wouldn’t kill a *baby*, much less an unborn one loved by their mother! That’s so *cowardly*. This poor me is *pretty* sure Xiao Gongzhu did it with one of those rare cultivator artifacts from that ugly father of hers. And then she immediately tried to get pregnant so she could be the first to bear a child for Junshang. For status and all that stuff that humans care so much about. Bah. The worst part is that the bitch got it!”

Seeing the despotic Yaozuo raised in such a spoiled way, Shen Yuan is almost certain that things are just as Sha Hualing says, no matter how PIDW has narrated it.

Sha Hualing lets out a dramatic sigh and drops her head against his shoulder, rubbing herself like a lazy cat.

“Anyway, Junshang is *so* easy when you look at him with your eyes, like when you just had him there, in your hands, giving you all those massages *in public*, you rascal,” she hums, looking at her nails. They are long black claws, and Shen Yuan feels his hands itching to keep them still so as not to examine whether her claws are normal nails that are too hard, or have a different texture and thickness. Perhaps it would be easier to examine Anhe’s. “This Lingling believed that all it took was to give Junshang a child to be his favorite. If this Lingling had known that *loving* his kids would make one an Empress, oh dear, this poor me would have snatched every child from those ugly Huan Hua girls’ hands a *long time ago,*” Sha Hualing hisses.

Shen Yuan looks at her with a raised eyebrow. Sha Hualing has a radiant, dangerous smile.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Shen Yuan says. Because *he has no idea.* What the…? Luo Binghe has never chosen an Empress at any point in the narrative that he knows of, and there definitely is no Empress right now!! What the hell is she saying?

Sha Hualing looks at him with a raised eyebrow. Her savage grin seems to grow even wider, and just as Shen Yuan is ready to apologize and slink away before being devoured, Sha Hualing lets out a hearty laugh. Her hands pinch one of Shen Yuan's cheeks, and Shen Yuan understands almost immediately why Chengle has automatic instincts to bite whenever he does that. He's not even a demon but he's having them now!

"Oh, what a ridiculously innocent little poor thing!" Sha Hualing howls, giggling. Shen Yuan gasps in horror as she leans in, almost predatory, on him, planting a smacking kiss on his cheek that he's absolutely sure leaves a bright red lipstick mark. "You're *so* cute, you small pure white flower! Junshang will eat you *alive*!"

Sha Hualing continues to laugh out loud, as if Shen Yuan's horrified expression is the funniest thing she's seen in a long time. Shen Yuan turns to look where Luo Binghe and Liu Mingyan are talking, only to find them both staring at him. Liu Mingyan has a smile hidden behind her sleeve, clearly visible in the curve of her dark eyes, and Luo Binghe...

Ah. *Fuck.*

Luo Binghe hasn't looked any worse for wear since that nightmarish moment, and Shen Yuan feels such a lurch in his stomach that he looks away, feeling all the blood drain from his face and hearing a ringing in his ears. Really!! Sha Hualing wanted him *fucking dead*!? Because that's exactly what she was going to get by making her husband jealous like that!

⋆ ⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆ ⋆

Anyone would think staying away from Luo Binghe in the midst of a situation like this would be easy, especially considering the palace is basically *huge.*

However, Shen Yuan finds out that it's a pretty damn difficult thing to do: they spend a good part of the afternoon in those small gardens, and even when other wives come clearly demanding their husband's attentions (Shen Yuan can recognize the figures of the Qin sisters, and a little while later, the haughty Xiao Gongzhu in pink robes and with so much jewelry she looks like a display case. In fact, he would go and talk to her directly to scold her for how she is raising her son if he weren't trying to *avoid* Luo Binghe until his anger passes, and all the wives seems excessively needy for his attention with all that cleavage and those syrupy blinks that make him nauseous), Luo Binghe dismisses them all and sticks around.

Shen Yuan avoids speaking to him, standing up whenever he sits near, daring to play with Chengle until his muscles burn, and even allowing Shaoyu to give him a *gentle bite* that doesn't penetrate the robe, but seems to please the girl enough that she can be distracted with something else.

He doesn't even dare look in Luo Binghe's direction. Even though he's washed his face with the pond water, and Chengle has assured him about five different times that there are no more red marks on his face, Shen Yuan feels that spot burning red-hot, humiliated and ashamed. Sha Hualing, really! Did that woman want him *dead*?!! Was that it?! Is that what it was all about?!

Late afternoon comes all too soon. Mu Qingfang appears at some point to have a brief talk with Liu Mingyan, something Shen Yuan discovers the man does daily, keeping a follow-up of her heart demons. It's a huge relief, and Shen Yuan allows himself to let his guard down a little, his fingers stroking the surface of the lake and laughing when the small, practically harmless (as long as there are no colors from their scales on their fingers) fish chase him.

They feel like doctor fish, tickling his fingers, and Shen Yuan is distracted enough that, when he raises his head, suddenly aware of the silence, he realizes there are no children, no stuffed tigers, no Sha Hualing. Only Luo Binghe is standing a little farther away, still with that dark gaze, and Shen Yuan watches the fish with a tiny bit of nervousness, thinking that soon his ugly dead body will probably ruin its still waters.

“Yuan-ge has been avoiding this Lord,” Luo Binghe says. Evening has fallen; somehow, the light coming from the artificial skies is orange, a dull hue that cuts through without a sun but with a sense of golden sunset dripping onto the grass, between the red leaves, and lengthening the shadows in every corner. “Does Yuan-ge have anything to say about this?”

Shen Yuan finds himself with nothing to say and all too aware of his heart pounding against his ribs.

“I…” he swallows. His mouth is dry. “I didn’t think… I hoped you wouldn’t…” he stumbles over his own words. Shen Yuan struggles to breathe, focusing on what he knows: Luo Binghe may be furious with him, but *he’s not going* to kill him. He wouldn’t be able to. Wouldn’t he? Yes, they’re in a world *too far* removed from Shen Yuan’s own, but Chengle would *never* forgive his father for that, and besides, Luo Binghe has been being… good. A good roommate, a good father, a good…, well, good person! He doesn’t deserve to be thought of by Shen Yuan as…

But still, when Luo Binghe takes a seat in front of him, Shen Yuan feels himself breaking out in a cold sweat.

“Yuan-ge must be sore and exhausted,” Luo Binghe says. Shen Yuan tries to say something, anything, but whatever he’s going to say comes out as an awkward rasp as Luo Binghe takes one of his legs, beginning to put pressure on the tense muscles above his pants. Shen Yuan looks down at his own dress shoes, white with pointed toes and ridiculously modern for the robes he wears, with a strange dizziness. “It’s been an unusually long day, and Yuan-ge has only taken a short nap today.”

Luo Binghe clicks his tongue a few times in disapproval. Shen Yuan feels his heart racing, terrified, as Luo Binghe pulls a little on his leg, almost knocking him off balance, leaning further into the space between them. He feels dizzy, clutching at the grass, as Luo Binghe continues to press into his swollen muscles. It's both pain and relief, and Shen Yuan can feel his face burning ridiculously. It's almost humiliating.

“It was a long day,” he admits, trying not to sound annoyed. “I’ll be fine. Just… I’ll sleep early tonight.”

“Yes? Does Yuan-ge want to sleep really early today?” Luo Binghe continues with his hands, a menacing thing as they come, pressing the most tense and inflamed parts of his muscles.

Shen Yuan feels like he's under a ridiculous Pavlov effect, already too used to Luo Binghe easing the pain in his legs, unable to stop his walls from lowering and relaxing to allow him to do whatever he wants, however he pleases. Luo Binghe takes advantage, the ruthless man, causing a relief that hurts and a pain that heals, while Shen Yuan feels himself tremble under his hands that knead him as if he were a snack he was ready to cook, ready to eat.

Shen Yuan feels his face burning. He reminds himself to answer only because Luo Binghe is staring at him strangely, intensely, behind thick eyelashes and dark eyes.

"Yes," he finds himself saying, licking his lips. His own breathing is ragged. "I… should. Say goodnight. To Chengle. And go to sleep. Like, now."

"It's not night to say goodnight yet," Luo Binghe says, with a lazy smile. The warmth of his hands penetrates the fabric of his pants. Shen Yuan shivers. "Yuan-ge will wake up very early, before the sun sets."

"Okay," Shen Yuan says hollowly. "I'll get some more sleep. I'll be fine."

Luo Binghe hums. He leans closer, and Shen Yuan gasps as Luo Binghe moves his leg a little, bending it slightly. *It's* painful, but not in a burning way, just the kind of stretching pain his exercises and massages should cause. Still, moving it like that, with Luo Binghe almost trapping him beneath his body, is absolutely insane, anyone watching would think...

Anyone who saw them…

"Yuan-ge," Luo Binghe said, his hand under his knee, where the bundle of tendons and nerves is making his leg practically tremble. "This Lord doesn't like to be ignored."

"I'm not ignoring you!" Shen Yuan says, practically choked out. His leg trembles, and Luo Binghe runs his hand down the inside of his leg, sparks of qi making him nearly melt as all the aching tension in his leg relaxes. "Luo Binghe, I don't-…"

Luo Binghe's movement stops dead in its tracks. His eyes are harsh. Shen Yuan's heart almost stops too.

"*Binghe,*" Luo Binghe says. His voice comes out low, a threat, a rumble that makes Shen Yuan's heart burst against his throat, echoing in his head and buzzing against his ears. "Yuan-ge calls me Binghe. Not Junshang. Not Lord Luo. Not Luo Binghe. To Yuan-ge, for Yuan-ge, *I am* Binghe."

"Binghe," Shen Yuan says, almost automatically, and Luo Binghe's mouth curves into a smile. Shen Yuan feels like a small, cornered prey, so close that he can smell sweet tea on Luo Binghe's breath, so close that the heat from his body is equal to the contrast of the cool grass against his elbows, beneath his hands. "*Binghe,*" he repeats, and a low sound emerges from Luo Binghe's throat, a sound that sounds just somewhere between a growl and a purr.

Luo Binghe is a hunter, the apex predator, the alpha of the food chain. A Demon Emperor, a Heavenly Demon, the fiercest of cultivators, a man who has shed his humanity to return the

mistreatment he has suffered tenfold. Some would call him a beast, others a tyrant, others a hero. A lucky few called him beloved.

Shen Yuan knows this from hundreds upon hundreds of words of PIDW. He knows how Luo Binghe ensnares, weaving a web of charm, with charismatic smiles even while his hands are stained with blood. And even when he first met Luo Binghe, even when he was afraid of him, even when the nightmare of his hand piercing him made him feel nervous and sick around him, Shen Yuan has never felt more like tiny prey, more like the victim of his entwined web of charm, than in that exact moment, with Luo Binghe holding him like a rag doll.

Everything about him is warm: his hands, his breathing, the heat of his body almost on top of his. Shen Yuan is trapped, *maddeningly* trapped, suffocating, drowning. His heart is an erratic thing, a chaotic mess on the verge of a possible heart attack, his hands tremble on the grass, and Shen Yuan feels a muffled, distant sound coming from his throat, unable to understand anything at all.

Anyone would say…

If they saw them now, anyone would say…

“Yuan-ge,” Luo Binghe seems to caress his name with his tongue. His breath is almost upon him, right in the dragon’s jaws, trembling beneath its claws, every hair on his body standing on end. His eyes burn from not blinking, but he doesn’t dare even close them, not with Luo Binghe so close, with a curtain of dark hair closing in, eyelashes so long and eyes dense, black on black, pupils so wide they almost swallow him like a black hole. “Shen Yuan,” Luo Binghe whispers, making Shen Yuan shiver. The heat is in his chest, in his face, an unfamiliar, electrifying adrenaline against his fingers. “*A-Yuan.”*

Shen Yuan lets out a groan. It's too much. *Too much, too much.* The dizziness makes him so weird that everything spins around him, the heat spreading through his chest is going to burn him alive, the fire is going to devour him and leave him in ashes and remains and-

As if caused by a spark, everything burns.

Shen Yuan gasps as if he's been punched, but no sound actually emerges, not when every sound, noise, protest, complaint, or even scream dies, devoured ferociously by Luo Binghe's lips on his own.

Chapter End Notes

SY: I only come to the palace for and because of Chengle
SY, after meeting a couple of wives and some children: *deep sigh* Okay, I REALLY don't think it's a bad idea to come visit more often

SY: Of course, Luo Binghe is the heterosexual man™, master of a harem of three hundred wives and has all these children. He's definitely someone totally and completely

straight. How can all these people insinuate that I, ALSO A STRAIGHT MAN, could be his consort? I don't understand what's wrong with everyone. They're totally wro-
LBH: *kisses him*
SY: *Pikachu meme*

Oh my God, okay, it's happening. Everybody stay calm *starts screaming* UNSTOPPABLE FORCE VS. IMMOVABLE OBJECT: LUO BINGHE'S SEDUCTION VS. SHEN YUAN'S OBLIVIOUNESS. WHO WILL WIN? WE'LL FIND OUT...?????? HEHEHEEHEHEHEHEE :B

Also, what Liu Mingyan wanted to say: "Wait, wait, what do you mean you're still ill? Our husband isn't...? Oh, my..."
Sha Hualing knew exactly what she was doing, wild girl, I adore her so much, that being a mother of two little devils doesn't mean she can't be a terrible beast. ALSO, SHEN YUAN, THE OBVIOUSLY STRAIGHT ONE, WHOSE ONLY REACTION TO RECEIVING A SMOOCH FROM A PRETTY WOMAN DRESSED IN SKIMPLY SILK IS TO LOOK DIRECTLY AT LUO BINGHE. BOY. PLEASE. THAT CLOSET IS ASKING YOU TO COME OUT. IT'S BEGGING YOU

sip of tea by the way, we just met a future Qijiu baby. There are a lot of babies in this chapter. Place your bets *pours more tea*

Seriously, I guess you can tell how much fun I'm having writing these chapters? I'm not saying I don't enjoy writing slice-of-life. I LOVE slice-of-life. It's just that harem dramas are quite fun to write, and I find it twice as fun to write about children. I want to pinch their cheeks positively and negatively. Plus, it's fun to put Shen Yuan in such a distractingly awkward place that he can't think about himself for 0.1 second... until now, when he'll have SO MUCH to think about :P EHEHEHEHE

ANYWAY. WHAT CAN I SAY??? I HOPE YOU LIKED THE CHAPTER!!! THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING!!! I HAD A LOT OF FUN WRITING THIS, AND I HOPE YOU HAVE EVEN MORE FUN READING IT. THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR ALL THE HUGE SUPPORT!!!!
I don't have a schedule for next week yet, but I THINK we'll be on Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday, every other day again!!! Anyway, I'll confirm on Tuesday with the new chapter :P
SEE YOU SOON!!!

Chapter 30: Second chances to discover something new

Chapter Notes

HELLO, I KNOW IT'S ONLY BEEN A COUPLE OF DAYS BUT DID YOU MISS ME? I MISSED YOU!!!! ;D MWAH sorry I ate cake and I have a huge sugar overdose in my system right now :P

GUES WHO GOT A REAL BETA?? ME!!! SAY HI TO BOO AND WELCOME HER, SHE'S JOINED OUR JOURNEY AS MY BETA READER :D She's my current co-pilot and I'm going to absolutely drive her crazy (affective). I'm so sorry in advance. You can find her on AO3 and Tumblr!! :D

ALSO!!! WE HAVE FANART!! YOU CAN FIND IT HERE!!!! AND LAUGH BECAUSE IT'S AWESOME

Chapter warnings: Shen Yuan™, internalized ableism, more child abandonment issues

ENJOY THE CHAPTER! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan is absolutely certain he's gone *crazy*. That he's been poisoned and has started to hallucinate. That, at some ridiculous and chaotic moment, someone has leaked poison from some rare xianxia herb and he's simply *delirious*. Because in a delirium completely *unrelated* to reality and completely oblivious to anything that could actually happen, Luo Binghe *had kissed him.*

But. *But.*

But that was fucking *real*.

Shen Yuan doesn't even remember how the hell he got out of. The situation. His thoughts are spinning completely out of control. He's not sure what happened, not sure what led Luo Binghe to-

Because he had-

Shen Yuan slaps himself so hard it stings against his cheek. It literally feels like his head has short circuited. Zi-Zhao led him from the… garden, or the corridor later, or-…? The important thing is that she led him. Out. And this time Shen Yuan didn't even need to stop once along the way, unable to feel anything in his body but confusion and numbness and-

What the fuck.

The servants have prepared the room with a large array of amenities. They've unpacked some of his clothes into a trunk mixed with robes, and a door leads to a closet where at least twelve different sets of fancy robes hang. The servants, apparently under Luo Binghe's explicit orders, have also prepared a bathtub for him behind a paper screen, steaming water filled with herbs, oils, and things that smell more like a traditional medicine shop than a bath, and have prepared him a change of clothes for sleeping, exchanging glances that Shen Yuan ignores as best he can.

Shen Yuan dismisses all the servants with clumsy thanks and locks himself away, *alone*, his heart pounding in his throat. His mouth is dry, his heart is racing, and he's absolutely certain he has a fever. And that he's going crazy. And that he's been poisoned. Because obviously no one and nothing could poison Luo Binghe so that he would-, because he wouldn't, *he wouldn't—*

Shen Yuan grabs one of the perfect pillows from the perfect bed they've made, a soft, downy thing filled with feathers, and screams into it. Only then, when his head stops spinning and his voice is practically gone, does he retreat behind the screen. He empties the sleeves of his robes, discarding the small qiankun bags and the sword he took from Yaozuo, leaving them as far away as possible, taking deep, controlled breaths so that his head stops spinning and so he doesn't hyperventilate at the same time.

Before getting into the water, he's not stupid and leaves a pair of his comfy pajamas nearby, ignoring all the silk and chiffon the servants have laid out for him. Visiting a damn xianxia world isn't going to stop him from enjoying the comforts of stretch and soft cotton. What kind of demonic fashion do they think he's going to follow, with all those sheer fabrics!?

He hangs his robes up to provide some shade from the paper screen so he doesn't look like a ridiculous silhouette on the paper. Ridiculous. *Embarrassing*. Shen Yuan does his best to get into the warm water without slipping along the way, allowing himself to relax as the water reaches his neck. He's surrounded by the scent of oils and medicinal herbs, and everything in his head repeatedly screams that *Luo Binghe kissed him.*

Fuck.

That's not relaxing at all.

Shen Yuan hides his face underwater for a few seconds, but his lungs are pathetic enough that he can't hold his breath for more than a few seconds, so he resurfaces, his hair dripping with water, his face burning, and he's trembling and–

Luo Binghe kissed him. Luo Binghe kissed him. *Luo Binghe kissed him.*

Shen Yuan dunks his head underwater again and screams.

He forces himself out, taking deep breaths, trying to get his heartbeat under control. He needs… he needs clarity of mind. Coherence. Cohesion. To understand what the hell happened. It’s not like there’s any way Luo Binghe could have mistaken him for one of his wives in the first place; Shen Yuan is certain that there’s something *big* on most of his wives that Shen Yuan *clearly* doesn’t have or boast about!! And his hair is clearly short, which is

another huge difference. None of them were wearing green, either! The closest thing was one wearing blue! Shen Yuan of course isn't-…

He isn't a *woman* that Luo Binghe can kiss. He is *not* a wife. Why the hell did Luo Binghe kiss him?

Shen Yuan, not for the first time today—there really had been times when he was dying to take

pictures of everything, but more so now than the rest of the day—misses his phone. Although that's ridiculous, because there's no fucking internet in the xianxia world, let alone a mobile data network, just to have a way to yell at Airplane for...!

Or just. To talk to him.

Shen Yuan submerges his head again until his lungs genuinely hurt and then he doesn't do it again, feeling himself tremble like a leaf even in the damn boiling water.

Luo Binghe kissed him. Yes. But there had to be some kind of logical explanation, some kind of rational reasoning for him to do… something like that. Shen Yuan forces himself to breathe as deeply as his battered lungs allow, sorting through the things he unpacked next to the bathtub for his bath soap and shampoo bottles. The xianxia world may have many good things, but definitely not his brand of soap and shampoo!

Shen Yuan just needs to… calm down. Think. A logical reason! There has to be one, definitely! One that could explain why Luo Binghe just… just decided…

Shen Yuan restrains himself from submerging his head in the water just because he won't waste his shampoo.

Okay. Luo Binghe… kissed him. The question Shen Yuan must grapple with now is what *forced* him to do it? Because, clearly, a man like Luo Binghe, a harem master, conqueror of absolutely all those wives, father of many children!!!, definitely didn't… he definitely didn't…

Xin Mo is the most logical explanation. Shen Yuan doesn't understand why Xin Mo would force Luo Binghe to make an advance like that, but it wouldn't be so… narratively inaccurate. Xin Mo, the heart demon, forcing Luo Binghe to proceed with the only kind of affection he'd ever known in the turmoil of that shitty sword's influence! It's not a bad theory. Not at all. In fact, it's feasible! Luo Binghe wouldn't even have actually kissed him, it would have been like those things alcoholic college dudes do under the influence of all the substances they take and never remember the morning after…!

Except Shen Yuan never has any luck. If he's relieved that Luo Binghe has forgotten it, he's sure his life hates him enough that he'll never forget it. Humiliating situation! Shameful!

What if Luo Binghe blames him!? No! Shen Yuan doesn't- he doesn't-…!

His hands are shaking. He's probably gotten shampoo in his eyes; they're burning so much.

Shen Yuan didn't do *anything*. Nothing. Luo Binghe just, he just acted! And Shen Yuan panicked, probably! He doesn't even remember exactly what expression Luo Binghe had when Shen Yuan managed to sneak away. He doesn't even remember *how* he managed to sneak away! He's completely innocent of all the charges against him! Really!!

He just…

Shen Yuan doesn't want to think about any of that.

He finishes his bath, forcing himself to take a deep breath and focus on all the ridiculous things around him. He does a good job of recognizing some floating herbs in the bathtub, little things clearly added to help with relaxation, a general anesthetic, and it really works! He doesn't feel like he's going to die from the pain! Good service, good service.

When the water starts to cool, he gets out of the bathtub, figuring pneumonia is the last thing he needs right now. He dries himself off awkwardly, sitting on a stool by the water, and only when he's dressed and ready to dive into bed, cover himself with all the blankets, and ignore the fact that he's a living being, does he step out from behind the screen and feel his heart stop.

Ah. Fuck.

Luo Binghe sits there. A small smile appears on his face, and Shen Yuan's entire world begins to spin.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, his simplicity hitting him like a punch. Shen Yuan clutches the paper screen, staring at the cane lying abandoned at the side of the bed. Luo Binghe reaches out a hand, and Shen Yuan practically trips over his own feet to get to the bed, with nowhere else to take cover without falling, looking even more pathetic. "Was the bath nice?"

Shen Yuan tries to answer a "yes" that comes out as a croak. He clears his throat, climbing into bed as far away from Luo Binghe as he can, trying not to think that-

He's not even mentally ready to deal with any of that!! Luo Binghe, please!! Piety!!

Luo Binghe hums softly, his expression so gentle it's disturbingly odd. "This Lord assumed it would be appropriate. After all, Yuan-ge put in quite an effort today." And with a simplicity that nearly draws a squeak from him, Luo Binghe places his hand on his ankle. Shen Yuan feels a jolt in his chest, his heartbeat reminding him of adrenaline, but Luo Binghe simply pulls a bit at his ankle and molds it between his fingers with a pressure that is…

He is…

"This Lord had a brief conversation with Mu Qingfang about the success of the poultices in relieving Yuan-ge's pain," Luo Binghe says, with absolute calm. Only then, as if his brain had simply ignored them, does Shen Yuan notice the gauze and the containers of paste and ointment to the side. "Mu Qingfang was kind enough to prepare a slightly more concentrated version for this occasion, given that he already had to visit Yuan-ge about his pain today."

“Yes,” Shen Yuan repeats *again*, his voice hoarse. He struggles to breathe and speak at the same time. Damn, he struggles to breathe and *think* at the same time. “It’s… although it’s not…”

Shen Yuan doesn't really say anything, but Luo Binghe hums as if he understands his every word. Shen Yuan is dizzy.

His pajama pants are comfortable and wide, and Luo Binghe slides his hands under the hem with overwhelming ease. They’re warm hands, strong fingers pressing against his skin, against still sore muscles. His ankles are slightly swollen, a major red flag that he's absolutely pushed himself too hard, but Luo Binghe works with relentless firmness and expert gentleness, and Shen Yuan just…

He can't help but notice that Luo Binghe acts as if it were just another day. As if they were on the comfortable sofa at home, with the TV playing in the background and Chengle drawing, writing, or playing. Even when Luo Binghe relaxes a little after dripping drops of oil onto his hands to help with the circulatory massage for his inflammation, Shen Yuan can feel his heart thrumming against his throat, above his ears, and in his head, because just as if it were just another day, Luo Binghe is humming the rhythm of one of the melodies from the children's shows Chengle watches.

His hands are warm, firm, and Shen Yuan slumps back against the pillows, unable to stay upright, forcing himself to breathe deeply. He feels like he's being burned by something pushing against his chest, fierce and absolute.

“Is Yuan-ge really that tired?” And as Luo Binghe steps closer, his hands rise as well, dragging his pants with them, bending and bunching at his knees. Shen Yuan could scream if he had the strength.

“Yes,” he says, because it’s apparently the only thing his brain can manage to say. Everything is spinning in absolute chaos. What the hell is going on? “It’s… it was a very… I…”

Luo Binghe nods with another hum. Still humming the soft rhyme, Shen Yuan forces himself to breathe, and Luo Binghe massages firmly. Shen Yuan notices, only with a sensation of floating above his head, that Luo Binghe is only massaging, not applying the poultices, his hands lingering in familiar, routine motions, but at a much slower pace, taking absolutely all his time. Shen Yuan covers his face with his hands, unable to concentrate.

So. *So. So.* Luo Binghe is pretending like nothing happened? *Acting* like nothing happened? Not addressing the issue? Not saying anything about it? Is he waiting for Shen Yuan to—? HA! Never! *Never*! Just ignore the thing! Nice. Great. *Magnificent*. A lapsus linguae, but instead of a mistake made with his tongue, he made a mistake made by sticking his tongue in someone else's mouth! Yes!! *Absolutely logical!*

“Yuan-ge should relax,” Luo Binghe says. Both hands focus on one leg now, and Shen Yuan hisses as he presses on a painful spot on the calf to relieve it. “The palace is a very big place. This Lord hadn’t considered just how large until now.”

Shen Yuan nods. He sits up slightly, forcing himself to maintain a neutral expression. If Luo Binghe can behave and pretend nothing has happened, Shen Yuan definitely can as well!

“After this,” he forces himself to say, feigning a light tone of voice, “when we get home, I’ll sleep for a *whole* day. Or two. It’s all *exhausting.* ”

Luo Binghe laughs. His laugh is rich and low, and Shen Yuan tries hard not to look at him. He notices that on a corner, where he's left the robes hanging on the paper screen, the drops of water and splashes are already drying in a darker stain on the floor. He supposes the belt will be reusable if he chooses a set of robes for the next day, though he'll *definitely* wear more comfortable shoes; he's packed some, and maybe *for comfort* he can wear sneakers if he can find robes long enough to cover them...

Luo Binghe has stopped his movements, his hands flat against his skin, neither pressing nor moving. Shen Yuan turns his face, curious, and at the exact second he makes eye contact with Luo Binghe, almost by accident-

It's no *accident*.

Luo Binghe leans over him and kisses him again.

The press of Luo Binghe’s lips on his is warm, sparkling, electrifying. There’s no escape in any direction for Shen Yuan; with the mere touch of his mouth against his, Shen Yuan can understand why this man has three hundred wives, why the reputation that precedes him *literally* precedes him. Luo Binghe kisses with the thick fire of a harem master, but the brush of his lips on his is almost delicate, a more subtle caress. Even though Shen Yuan feels himself being devoured, consumed by a fire that burns from his chest and veins to his entire skin, Luo Binghe’s kiss is something that makes him tremble and lose all logical thought.

Luo Binghe pulls away for a moment, the exact second Shen Yuan has to take a breath that feels freezing and panic for a moment, and then he kisses him again, pinning him back into the mattress with his body. The kiss burns. Shen Yuan burns. With a little more oxygen in his brain, he holds Luo Binghe's robes tightly with trembling hands. He should push him away, he should try to—well, he's clearly confused! Stupefied! Persuaded by something! Why would he want to do something like that!? *With him*?! Luo Binghe is clearly a straight man, and Shen Yuan is a *man*, it's not like—

…Luo Binghe licks his lip and Shen Yuan grips the robe he’s holding so tightly that his hands start to ache. If he makes a sound, he’ll never find out! Not with Luo Binghe the way he is…!

An abrupt sound startles him. Not just Shen Yuan; Luo Binghe sits up, and Shen Yuan collapses onto the bed again with a gasp, taking deep breaths, trying to stop his head from spinning. Again, another abrupt sound, and—

“You said Baba Yuan is here!” Chengle’s voice makes Shen Yuan feel his stomach drop. Fuck. *Oh, fuck.* He runs his hand down his face, sitting up in bed and getting as far away from Luo Binghe as he can. And just in time, because the next door that slams open fiercely is one that seems to connect to Luo Binghe’s rooms, and right after, Luo Chengle walks in with a bright, determined expression, and a bright red pair of robes that look very cute on

him. Right behind him, Zi-Zhao has an almost apologetic expression as she makes eye contact with Shen Yuan. Like she needs to apologize for something!!

“Chengle!” Shen Yuan forces himself to smile, trying to make sure that nothing on his face gives away that-… gives away any of it! No! He won’t make his kid furious and hysterical over something like that! Luo Chengle’s face is red, his pout is big, and his wet hair—at least, the parts that aren’t braided—is sticking up in all directions. “Darling, were you with your Lingling?”

“Lingling *kidnapped me*! She said we were going to play, then tricked me and gave me a bath! Like a *puppy*! She picked me up by the collar and threw me into the water! *Bad Lingling*!” Chengle squeals, clearly outraged. He is followed by at least three different stuffed tigers, also with their fur standing on end, clearly from also having been bathed and brushed after a long day of playing. Now, their sweet boy has at least 10 different braids all over his head, full of bows and clinking beads.

“And she put *this on me*! She said, ‘come on, just one, let Lingling braid your hair, your Lingling missed combing your hair!’ And An-ge was talking to me and distracted me! *I was kidnapped*! I never want Lingling again! Baba, take these off me! They make noise when I walk! I don’t like it!”

Chengle climbs onto the bed, pouting profusely. Shen Yuan feels nervous laughter bubbling up, but luckily the boy doesn't seem to find anything odd about Luo Binghe being there. He doesn't greet him with anything more than a grunt when his father tries to pinch his cheek, and Luo Binghe makes no gesture, or comment, or anything about it as he simply orders Zi-Zhao to bring the dinner he has prepared for them into the bedroom. The servant bows and leaves, and while Shen Yuan undoes the braids Sha Hualing made to remove all the clinking beads (he'll leave the ones with just ribbons. They're lovely anyway), Luo Binghe hands him the creams and styling brush for Chengle's hair, and only then does Luo Binghe begin to carefully apply the poultices, especially around his sore ankles.

Shen Yuan feels his pulse tremble. Chengle tells him that An-ge wants to eat some others of the sweets they brought, that they can share them over tea tomorrow, and Shen Yuan listens, humming assent here and there as he removes the clinking beads and styles the boy's hair. His son is such a sweet little bun, full of energy and joy, and unable to notice that Shen Yuan can't even deal with his own thoughts right now.

Luo Binghe wraps gauze around the poultices, allowing them to work their medicinal effects, and steps back to rinse his hands. Only then does Shen Yuan try not to be so hyperaware of how fast his heart is beating, or how cold his skin feels when Luo Binghe isn't touching him.

“I like the palace when Baba Yuan is here,” Chengle says, and Shen Yuan looks at his boy with curious eyes. “I never liked the palace. The wives are rude and the older brothers are *mean*. But with Baba Yuan everything was fun. Where Baba is, everything is better.”

Shen Yuan exhales slowly. He pulls his boy into a hug, and Chengle laughs as Shen Yuan begins to pepper his cheeks with kisses.

“Aren’t you the cutest boy ever?” he says, and Chengle laughs, hanging on in a tight hug.

Other servants bring dinner. It's clearly a multi-course meal prepared by Luo Binghe, who's already balancing trays on the bed with clean hands. Shen Yuan is hyperaware of Luo Binghe's every move, but he just sits there, at the same distance from him as when they eat on the sofa at home, and asks Chengle a few questions about his day and whether he had fun.

The boy responds in a much better mood, and after dinner, his son seems tired enough to practically fall asleep without even asking for dessert, a story, or one last game. Shen Yuan sighs, touched; at least the bed is big enough so his son has plenty of room to roll around and not kick him at night. Besides, his robes seem soft enough for him to sleep in.

“It was a good day,” Luo Binghe says, bowing. Shen Yuan feels his heart leap out of his chest, but what Luo Binghe is actually doing is brushing away a stray curl that’s almost in Chengle’s mouth. He tucks it behind the boy’s ear, and Shen Yuan feels his chest on fire. It burns like fire, so intensely that it’s consuming him alive. “I’ve never seen Chengle so happy in the palace before.”

“Did you see him before?” Shen Yuan asks. He immediately regrets it; it’s probably not the best kind of question, or the most appropriate way to phrase it. But Luo Binghe doesn’t seem to take it to heart, at least not as he would have done on other occasions. He just sighs.

“Sometimes,” he says. His voice sounds low and (somewhat) fragile. “This Lord… didn’t usually see them up close, any of his children, consistently. The responsibilities of an Emperor outweighed the time he could give to his children.”

“What changed?” Shen Yuan asks, unable to control his own damn tongue. He doesn’t know why, but *he needs* to know. He needs to know what’s different now. He needs to know that it’s not something that just happened because Shen Yuan is forcing it to. He *needs*... “Do you have more time now?”

Shen Yuan glances in Luo Binghe's direction. Thank goodness, Luo Binghe isn't looking his way, but towards where Chengle is sleeping.

“This Lord can prioritize what is most important, now,” Luo Binghe says simply. Shen Yuan allows himself to relax, exhaling in relief at the tension he didn't realize his body was holding back. “This one knows that not everything will be forgiven, but… I don’t expect it to be. I only hope to show my children that, despite my past mistakes, I can be there for them from now on.”

Shen Yuan feels a range of emotions he has no idea how to begin to describe, so he simply doesn't. He takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly, and smiles.

“Speaking of your children,” he begins, and now Luo Binghe looks at him, with an arched eyebrow, “Guess who I took a sword from because he *accidentally* threw it near where I was…?”

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At breakfast the next day, Luo Binghe doesn't act like anything strange has happened. Shen Yuan tries to mirror the same level of playing dumb. If Luo Binghe is going to behave like

nothing happened...! Fine! *Fine! Better*! Then Shen Yuan won't even have to think about it!

They have breakfast. It's almost like a normal day, except there are demon servants, Luo Binghe is wearing imperial robes with a deep neckline that makes Chengle give him unhappy looks until he closes the collar of the inner robe, and the bathroom is too xianxia for Shen Yuan's liking. Damn, Airplane, of all the fucking weird stuff he put in, couldn't he have put in some kind of normal modern plumbing and drains!?

Other than that, it feels almost like any other day. However, Shen Yuan doesn't have his phone to fool around with while Chengle gets ready in his modern, comfortable clothes underneath the elegant robe that Luo Binghe practically begs the boy to wear, clothes that are more practical for a day of play than looking good for the reunion with his mother. Nor does he have the TV playing in the background while Luo Binghe explains what kinds of talismans are in the new inner robes that he helps him to correctly put over another of his fancy shirts, the tag of which he must have removed even though it's more than three years old at the back of his closet, identical to the ones on the other robes with all those reinforcements demonstrable with the Heavenly Demon's own claws.

Shen Yuan chooses a slightly darker green pair of robes simply because they're the longest, and they completely cover his feet, which are wearing comfortable, non-stylish sneakers. The robes are right at the back of the closet, almost hidden. And honestly, they're heavier than they looked, once Luo Binghe, with a radiant smile and a mischievous glint in his eye, finishes helping him put them on with all those folds and creases. There's a ridiculously amount of visually busy embroidery everywhere, and Shen Yuan sighs. The things he's doing to avoid looking like a low-budget cosplayer...

Luo Binghe arranges the pendant with the red stone around his neck. Shen Yuan leaves it there, unhidden, only because he doesn't intend to touch the precisely bent collar and ruin it.

Chengle is the one who looks most fascinated with his clothes.

“Baba Yuan is handsome! Awesome! The best!” his boy squeals. He tugs at his sleeves a little, watching the drape, fascinated by the fabric. His little eyes are radiant, and if Shen Yuan were feeling less exhausted after a restless night of waking up at even the slightest noise from the unfamiliar room, he would probably pick him up. He doesn’t, just taking a seat on a couch slightly more comfortable than the one in Liu Mingyan’s room, holding his arms out for his boy to climb onto and receive a big, tight hug.

“You’re joking,” Shen Yuan says, pinching the boy’s cheeks, who laughs. “Look at you, you’re the most handsome.”

Chengle laughs, hiding in his arms. After he jumps away, it's Chengle who rushes to take Shen Yuan's hand and help him up before Luo Binghe moves forward, and when Shen Yuan actually stands up, his sweet, rowdy boy sticks his tongue out at his father.

Shen Yuan pretends he doesn't see him do it, and nor does he see Luo Binghe do the same, drawing a startled gasp from the boy, as if he hadn't expected such a bold move from his father. Out of sight, out of mind; Shen Yuan, however, can't ignore the weight of his robes as he reaches for his qiankun bag of sweets and snacks to stuff in his sleeves, coming across the

small paper fan. Ah. With those robes, he's *sure* he's going to need it, and throws it into his sleeves.

Then, when Zi-Zhao reappears to guide them *to the other side of the damn palace*, Luo Binghe says goodbye, promising to be available for lunch. Shen Yuan takes a lot more breaks: between his tired legs, poor sleep, and heavy clothes, it's actually easier to get exhausted. Chengle doesn't mind: followed by his three stuffed tigers (Dawang and his other two favorites; apparently, all the others have been left under the careful care–or *kidnapping,* according to Chengle–of Sha Hualing and Shaoshao), he's extremely happy because he wants to play with his An-ge, and maybe they can draw a little together…

And so, Shen Yuan discovers that Anhe really likes drawing, and that it's the Anhe who taught Chengle the most about drawing, and is the one who especially draws a lot in the stories Chengle makes up. Shen Yuan is already listing the children's gifts in his mind, amused; he's not entirely sure that getting Shaoshao a cold bite would help, but probably anything the girl can bite...?

When they reach the garden, Shen Yuan actually stands at the edge, struggling to take a deep breath and not panic.

Zi-Zhao understands the problem almost as quickly as he does.

"This humble one would recommend Young Master Shen take the long way around," the servant says, without even blinking. Shen Yuan is certain he *would if he could do it.* If there were no more than six wives yesterday, it's as if spring has fucking arrived: he's not sure if it was fifty, but there's *at least* thirty of Luo Binghe's wives, with their luxurious clothes, wearing jewelry like it's on display, their hairstyles full of hairpins. Shen Yuan is certain the number of them all looks higher because at least half of them have one or two ladies-in-waiting, demonic maids who do things like fan them or hold trays of snacks for them.

Shen Yuan is sure he should avoid all of them.

He also doesn't think he can walk around the entire garden and take the long way around without crying.

Chengle looks at all the women with a grimace, wrinkling his little nose. He squares his shoulders and approaches Shen Yuan to hold his hand firmly.

"Baba Yuan doesn't have to worry!" says his sweet boy, his determination beaming. His curls are fluffier from sleeping with his hair still damp, and he wears the few braids that didn't have clinking beads in them with shiny bows. "Chengle will protect Baba Yuan."

Shen Yuan feels his heart burning with tenderness. He pulls the boy's hand, leaning down to kiss his cheeks loudly. Chengle laughs a little.

"You are the most adorable, strong, and brave boy," Shen Yuan says, and if his boy is so brave and strong, why can't Shen Yuan be the same? "It's okay, my sweet prince. I trust in your protection. Let's go."

Shen Yuan notices that Zi-Zhao has a small smile that is more sweet than kind. The servant averts her face, clearing her throat and leading the way with an overly respectful bow. Unlike the day before, Chengle doesn't walk ahead playing with his tigers, instead he holds his hand and walks slowly beside him. So, looking at the boy, Shen Yuan can almost ignore the fact that he is surrounded by a large pile of high-quality poisonous flowers, scented and jeweled like traps made of living beings.

It's impossible for him not to hear all the whispers, though.

"…I heard that Husband brought him from another world…"

"…do you think he really is…?"

"…is he wearing *imperial robes*...?"

"…is it because of him that…?"

Shen Yuan tries hard to ignore them. He ignores absolutely every voice, concentrating on taking firm steps, on not falling, and on the fact that Chengle's hand never lets go. When they reach the other side of the garden, Shen Yuan walks halfway down the corridor before having to lean against a wall.

Zi-Zhao takes out another fan. Shen Yuan sighs, embarrassed, as she fans him. Really, who needs to keep so many fans around! Is it something every servant does?

"This humble one believes that Young Master Shen has made himself known in a dignified manner," the maid says, as if trying to reassure him. Shen Yuan nods in thanks. He isn't so sure.

It takes longer, because of the breaks, to arrive than the day before. When they do *finally* arrive, Shen Yuan practically collapses onto one of the stone benches as Luo Chengle runs off to find his kidnapped tigers, and runs back screaming when Shaoshao chases him. Shen Yuan has to cover his mouth with both hands to keep from laughing out loud when he realizes they are actually both being chased by Sha Hualing with hair ribbons in her hands.

A little while later, Liu Mingyan comes out on her own. Watching her walk is like seeing a fragile, white silhouette, and she stops there, just before her feet in delicate cloth shoes touch the garden ground. Shen Yuan summons his courage, and with his cane in hand and the courage that only doing something that would bring joy to Chengle could give him, he stands up from the bench and walks over to Liu Mingyan, offering her his arm for support. She smiles at him gratefully.

"It's a pleasure to see you today," she says. She looks a little less dazed than the day before, less shaken, but no less fragile. Shen Yuan feels her hands cold, and she is even thinner than Shen Yuan would have expected when her arm clasps his. He is sure she can't weigh much more than Chengle, which is worrying for someone so tall.

"The pleasure is mine," Shen Yuan hums. "Shall we take a walk or sit down?"

“Please sit down,” Liu Mingyan requests. Shen Yuan thanks her inwardly, and with small steps, he leads her to the bench where he had previously sat alone. Right now, Chengle is perched on one of the tree trunks, and although he’s not really far from the ground, Sha Hualing is clearly pretending that she doesn’t see him or the little girl hiding in a bush further away, subtly inching closer to where Shaoshao is hiding first.

“Husband has given us a pleasant day today,” Mingyan says, raising her head. Shen Yuan looks at the fake sky with a small grimace. Seriously, how long has it been since this woman saw a real sun? Could that even be healthy? …What exactly is the red sun of the combined demon-human realms supposed to be? Did it produce the same radiation as the normal-*normal* sun? Could the same amount of vitamin D in humans be absorbed from something like that? Technically, it had to be the same sun, *right*? Only perceived through another layer of ozone by demonic qi or… what *exactly*? “Does the Noble Consort not think so?”

Shen Yuan turns to Liu Mingyan, feeling like she just threw a bucket of cold water in his face.

“Oh, please *no*,” he begs. Liu Mingyan raises her eyebrows slightly, and if Shen Yuan keeps looking into her eyes—or even into her eyebrows, when exactly should he look people in the eye during a conversation?—he can actually avoid her face to the point of impossibility. “Don’t call me that. Seriously, why is everyone…?” Shen Yuan shakes his head. His ears feel like they’re burning. “I… well, I’m fine with Young Master Shen, uh, that’s fine. But we’re, well, family? I mean, *we could* be something like that,” Shen Yuan is quick to clarify. Liu Mingyan’s gaze is curiously amused. “You know, like Chengle’s parents. That would be nice. Being a family? I’m just trying to say, you don’t have to call me by any titles or respect or…! Just Shen Yuan or…?”

“Yuanyuan?” Shen Yuan nearly squealed when another voice hit him, a little too close. For someone whose silver clinked when she moved, Sha Hualing could be very quiet when she wanted to be. She pinched his cheek, and Shen Yuan narrowly escaped another noisy kiss. “Sounds nice, doesn’t it, my dearest? We have kids and a Yuanyuan now.”

Liu Mingyan chuckles, covering her mouth with her hand. Shen Yuan doesn't even have time to be embarrassed, because Sha Hualing is already pulling his hand to lift him from his seat, examining him up and down with that savage, critical eye that makes his hair stand on end.

“Oh my, my!” Sha Hualing lets out a long, drawn-out whistle. Shen Yuan feels his entire face turn red. “Look at you, look at *you*, rascal, pretty flower. Such beautiful robes! This Lingling *never* thought she would see embroidery like *that* within these walls. How heavy are they?”

“Too much,” Shen Yuan complains, feeling like his mood might improve a bit. He’s certain Sha Hualing doesn’t seem like the type of person who values aesthetics over comfort, given that although she’s wearing roughly three pieces of fabric all over her body, they don’t look like three uncomfortable pieces of fabric. “Just the sleeves are so *awkward* to move. I feel like I have sheets on my arms.”

Sha Hualing lets out another tinkling laugh. Shen Yuan waves his arms, allowing the silks to move, and Sha Hualing continues laughing. Liu Mingyan laughs too.

“They’re exquisite. They suit you well,” Liu Mingyan hums. Her eyes brighten. “This Mingyan has no doubt that no one could wear them better than Shen-xiong.”

For some reason, Shen Yuan feels like he's missing out on some xianxia subtext, far removed from his modern understanding. He can't really think about it either, because a small wrecking ball with her teeth bared is about to bite him.

“Two legs!!” the little girl squeals, clinging to his leg in a particularly painful way. Sha Hualing seems to notice, because she pulls the little girl to let go. Shaoshao kicks but lets her mother carry her. “Two legs-hug!”

“Only if you don’t bite me,” Shen Yuan warns. Shaoshao shakes her head, pouting and spreading her arms.

Chengle arrives at that very moment, with the most pitiful face in the world and eyes that dart from Liu Mingyan to Shen Yuan, as if he can't really decide who to throw himself at. Shen Yuan does the only intelligent thing on this occasion: he sits down and pulls both children into a hug, taking Chengle's arm next to Liu Mingyan's so that she can hold him close too. Shaoshao is a good girl and doesn't bite him, snuggling into his embrace. Chengle is a good boy and doesn't throw a tantrum about sharing an arm in his embrace, snuggling in too, accepting his mother's strokes on his hair.

“It’s nice to see you today, baobei,” Liu Mingyan whispers. Chengle, still in Shen Yuan’s arms, gives her a radiant smile.

“It’s nice to see Mom, too,” the boy says. And from the warmth in Liu Mingyan’s eyes, Shen Yuan knows that hearing that from Chengle means more to the woman than the boy could ever imagine.

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Shen Yuan doesn't have much trouble sitting still. Yes, *it's* hard to sit still without doing anything when he doesn't have a phone to distract him (and he's constantly searching his pockets out of habit until he remembers that not only does he not currently have pockets, but he also doesn't have a phone), but the truth is, he doesn't have much time to be bored.

He chats with Liu Mingyan for most of the morning. She has a huge pile of questions, and Shen Yuan has to confess, a little embarrassedly, that Chengle doesn't have a room of his own *yet*, but he will soon! And that he's looking for a large, comfortable apartment, but for God's sake, not as big as a palace, or he won't be able to get from the dining room to his bedroom without an assistant.

Liu Mingyan does seem to laugh at some of his jokes. At others, she looks so fatigued that Shen Yuan changes the subject. She seems overwhelmed and easily lost in words or sounds, and Shen Yuan understands very well why Chengle might feel so abandoned if she, in a state of progress and improvement, is still so difficult to maintain even a small conversation with.

Still, it's clear that Liu Mingyan is making a great effort: she asks for, and Shen Yuan has a chance to pull out his latest batch of pictures, and then the morning passes much more

quickly: they sit under the shade of a tree and Shen Yuan shows her all the photos and tells her about the stories behind them. He introduces her to all the people in his family by name and a little about themselves, and Liu Mingyan seems quite curious about all of them.

“Perhaps you could meet them,” Shen Yuan says, and Liu Mingyan looks at him with a surprised expression. “Someday. When you’re ready to go further away from here?” He points at the garden. “I’m sure my mother will *adore* you, and Chenxue, of course. God, she’ll be *crazy* about her; she loves babies. Well, now. She went through a… well, something like what you have now, after my Meimei was born, so… perhaps she could give you some aid?”

His mother's emotional situation had probably been something entirely different from Liu Mingyan's, but, eh, anything other than 'heart demons' could be helpful, Shen Yuan thinks!

Liu Mingyan seems warmly grateful for the invitation. She neither rejects nor accepts it out loud, but from the questions she keeps asking, more oriented toward the unusual attire of the people there, Shen Yuan assumes she's seriously considering it.

The idea pleases him. Suddenly, he wonders if a… second guest room will be necessary. God, that's already too many rooms! The main bedroom, Chengle's room, Binghe's room, an extra room for Liu Mingyan if he wants to stay over? Oh God, maybe he should buy air mattresses in case Sha Hualing's children decide to visit? God, *no*, Shaoshao would definitely bite it, let alone water mattresses…

Perhaps a house with a well-equipped, warm basement that can be used as a small second home, with rooms set up for guests, and all the amenities?

That's... that's not a bad idea. Not really. And if he had a real garden, maybe Liu Mingyan could get some real sun, and, well, didn't Jiu-ge say that sun helps depression or something...?

Shen Yuan has to stop his mind from rambling on. He's going too far, *too far afield*, on a decision that isn't his. Not entirely, at least, but he feels too cowardly to make the invitation anything more than a casual visit. He only hopes that if Liu Mingyan really decides to visit them someday, it will be when he has a little more space to offer her. After all, he doesn't have another sofa he can sleep on if Luo Binghe is occupying the one in the living room!

And, speak of the devil. A long morning of games, stories, and Shen Yuan forcing Chengle to stay still for a while and make progress with some of his activity books (which Anhe is *very* curious about. Shen Yuan makes a point of bringing some age-appropriate ones for the budding little scholar) ends with Zi-Zhao apologizing on Luo Binghe's behalf, saying that something urgent has come up and he won't be able to make it to lunch even though he's ready and willing to make it for both of them. Liu Mingyan has already left to rest, and Sha Hualing has already taken her own children to lunch, so Shen Yuan is the only one who has to deal with Chengle's completely justifiable anger.

And his tears.

“He *promised*!” Chengle whines, thick tears streaming down his face. Shen Yuan cradles him in his arms. “He said! He *lied*! Liar! I don’t want him anymore!”

“I know, love.” Shen Yuan kisses his forehead and wipes the boy’s tears with his thumbs. “But, you know. He has all these big responsibilities. And it’s not fair, and it’s okay to feel bad about it. He gave his word, and he’s not keeping it. It's okay to be mad at him.”

Luo Chengle sniffles. Then he cries even louder.

“I don’t want to be here,” sobs his child. “I want *home*. Home where Father Emperor eats and plays and *behaves*. Not *here*!”

“I know, my love,” Shen Yuan cooed. Chengle cried harder. “We’ll both talk to your father. If he wants us to stay another day, he’ll have to keep his word. If not, he’ll take us back, and we’ll only return when he’s willing to keep his word. Is that okay for you, sweetheart?”

Chengle squirms a little more, then nods. It takes a little longer to calm the boy. All this time, Zi Zhao, the best servant, has been turning her back on them, offering them privacy only to peek out with cloth handkerchiefs so Shen Yuan can wipe Chengle's face.

“Aiya, look at those little eyes,” Shen Yuan said, placing kisses on the corners of his eyes. “They look red and swollen. They’re ripe strawberries. Are you sure they’re not strawberries?”

“Baba, no!” Chengle laughs a little, and a little more as Shen Yuan places more kisses over the tears. He wants, *he longs*, to wipe away his sweet boy’s pain the same way he wipes his tears: with love, patience, and care. Shen Yuan has a feeling that, little by little, he might succeed. “They’re my eyes! You can’t eat them!”

Shen Yuan hums, amused. “They still look like strawberries. Let me try…”

Shen Yuan places more noisy kisses on the corners of his eyes, tickles floating over his ribs. Chengle laughs until he stops crying. Shen Yuan still holds him in his arms, cradled and safe, feeling comfortable in his own skin for the first time since… since they arrived at the palace, probably.

It's a world that doesn't belong to him, filled with people who speak in such strange ways, ridiculous references to a title that *isn't his*, and clothes that feel so uncomfortable even in their labored comfort. The only thing that truly belongs to him there is the love he feels for his son. And, right now, calming his crying and easing some of the sorrow in his heart, Shen Yuan feels that the only place he belongs—and is content to belong—is with his son.

He's the most important thing. That's all Shen Yuan can focus on for now.

Chapter End Notes

SY: WELL, LUO BINGHE WAS FORCED TO KISS ME BY SOMETHING. I THINK-
LBH: *kisses him again*
SY: . . . Okay, then I'll pretend nothing happened until I can overcome it when I'm in a familiar comfort zone

SHL: So you're the new empress now. I approve that
SY: ?????? WHO WEARS SNEAKERS WITH ROBES? PLEASE. I JUST DON'T WANT TO LOOK LIKE A LOW-BUDGET COSPLAYER. I WANT TO AVOID CRINGE

We all know LBH doesn't have enough marriage points to kiss SY. We all know SY definitely knows none of that is very heterosexual on his part. SY is currently in a 'I can only deal with one chaotic, out-of-my-control thing at a time' mood, which is currently the harem of his child's father, and he's definitely NOT going to think about being kissed until he's in his cozy comfortable bed and can calmly panic.
But as they say around here, a little kiss doesn't make a marriage!! And Binghe definitely didn't see a refusal from SY enough to stop him from doing it again (who's our favorite unreliable narrator? Shen Yuan is, Shen Yuan is!! Shen Yuan "I don't like being kissed by Binghe I don't understand why he's kissing me WE ARE TWO STRAIGHT MEN-" while pulling him closer with his hands on his robes)

Also, Luo Binghe, you big bastard, how dare you disappear without saying anything and leave your son with abandonment issues in a place that encourages his abandonment issues and the non-husband you just kissed TWICE, what's so important as *checks notes for next chapter* oh.....

ALSO, BABY QIJIU. SOME OF YOU GOT IT RIGHT. THERE ARE A LOT OF GOLD STARS READY FOR YOU ALL, BUT I WON'T TELL WHO YOU GOT RIGHT UNTIL IT'S TIME FOR THE ADOPTION (KIDNAPPING) :D DON'T RUSH YOUR HEADS, THERE'S STILL AT LEAST HALF A STORY ARC LEFT (we still have to closet out SY..... that will take some time)

ANYWAY. HEHEHEHEHEHEHE THANKS SO MUCH FOR READING!!! I HOPE YOU ENJOYED THIS CHAPTER A LOT! IT WAS REALLY FUN WRITING IT AND I'LL HAVE MORE FUN WITH THE NEXT ONE :D Wanna guess? I BET you want to guess-
THANKS FOR ALL YOUR COMMENTS. YOU ABSOLUTELY WENT CRAZY OVER THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER!!! Me too, honestly, you make me so happy and I'm so grateful. In these horrible days for me, you guys are a HUGE RAY OF LIGHT and I love you so much. Thanks for all your support!!!! AND you know!!! We have fun together here, so kudo-comment-interact, be chaotic, be wild, enjoy, and let's have fun! ;D
SEE YOU SOON!!!

Chapter 31: Second attempts to do better

Chapter Notes

HELLO AGAIN!! WOW, I LOVE HOW MANY OF YOU THINK SO MUCH THAT LPM HAS DONE SOMETHING. I MEAN, YOU'LL SEE TODAY, BUT-
LOL I forgot to clarify the update schedule for this week. Anyway, see you on Monday!! :D

BTW. WE HAVE NEW FANART TOO. I'M CRYING, CRY WITH ME, SEE IT HERE!!!! IS GORGEOUS!!!!

Beta-readed by Boo!! You can find her on Tumblr and AO3! :D

Chapter warnings: Shen Yuan™, internalized ableism, irresponsible cane use, injuries, blood

Enjoy the chapter! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's clear that Luo Binghe made the meal even though he's not there, though even that doesn't improve Chengle's mood. He continues to sulk even when Anhe lends him his most colorful paints to use, and when Shaoshao starts bringing him pretty rocks and sticks from all over the yard to cheer him up, the boy only lets out increasingly long, melancholic sighs. He's somewhere between furious and merely sad, teetering further into the abyss of merely sad.

“That big *fool*,” Sha Hualing complains when Shen Yuan tells her the reason for Chengle’s bad mood. Sha Hualing looks as if she could confront her husband, fight him tooth and nail, and probably win. “How could he promise things? Especially to Chengle! He should know better! That little boy has a heart like a silk butterfly! Touch it wrong and his heart will break!”

And Sha Hualing rants a bit more about her husband. Shen Yuan clings to his only weapon for dealing with his sad little boy: artificial sugar and MSG. He pulls out the candy and snacks he's packed by the pile, and over the next hour and a half, Sha Hualing probably issues about 12 different death threats while trying to get Shaoshao down from the tree, because apparently *one* bite of strawberry mochi is too much sugar for a wild, hyperactive child like Shaoshao.

The death threats aren't real, Shen Yuan wants to think, because they sound like the kinds of things Jiu-ge says: harsh but without any real bite. When Liu Mingyan reappears, book in hand, unsteady steps before heading out into the garden, Shen Yuan shares mochi with her too, and Chengle's mood, already a little high from the sugar, finally improves as he curls up

where his mother settled on the grass. Anhe sits nearby too, and Shen Yuan is on the bench close enough to know it's some kind of story time.

“Ah, look at that flower,” Sha Hualing said, and she had already stopped cursing him, a wild Shaoshao caught by the ankles. “She hasn’t done that in a long time.”

Sha Hualing's expression is warm. Even with a squealing, squirming little girl in hand, chewing on a twig and with her hair covered in reddish leaves, Sha Hualing has such a sweet, warm, and gentle expression. If that were Shen Yuan's first impression of her, he would never have imagined her to be the sadistic Saintess Demon Sha Hualing.

And while Chengle is enjoying his story time, Shen Yuan realizes he could be having *his own* story time. He stands up and tells Sha Hualing he won't go far (he hopes) before walking off to find Zi Zhao. As if the demon servant had a switch to be summoned, she approaches him with a respectful bow.

“Is there anything this humble one can do for you?”

Shen Yuan assesses how much his legs hurt. It's not *that big of a deal* as long as he finds somewhere to sit.

“Is there a library nearby?” he asks, with renewed curiosity.

It turns out there is a library inside the inner harem wing. It's not that far away, and Shen Yuan is led by Zi-Zhao through far fewer corridors than he had initially thought. Or perhaps his shoes are more comfortable. The important thing is that when he arrives, Zi-Zhao bows cautiously, allowing him to pass. Shen Yuan asks Zi-Zhao to return to the garden to inform Sha Hualing where he is in case story time ends soon and Chengle realizes he's wandered farther than a room away, and Shen Yuan lets himself be devoured by the rows and rows of books.

It doesn't disappoint. Many of the books are cultivation books, specific manuals on various techniques mentioned only by name alongside a 'most complex method of the sect of...', but Shen Yuan successfully finds a couple of volumes of herbalists and bestiaries that look particularly interesting. He takes everything he can carry in his qiankun sleeves—he's not stealing! Not technically! Just getting something to read now and... well, maybe when he's finished it, Luo Binghe can return it, because he's probably not going to finish reading any of it in just these few days of visiting...—glad that this means he doesn't have to carry so much weight. Ah, how great it would be if he could make the pockets on his hoodie the same!

…maybe he can suggest it to Luo Binghe, too.

He's distracted enough that, if it weren't for the same tugging sensation as the previous afternoon—something vibrating from his belt, giving him a feeling of alertness that makes his hair stand on end—Shen Yuan wouldn't even have been able to notice he wasn't alone in that library. He closes his book and looks up.

Cruel eyes are looking at him not far away.

“Wow,” she says. She’s wearing pink, and with an uncomfortable shudder, Shen Yuan recognizes her. Xiao Gongzhu wears even more jewelry than the glimpse he had of her the day before, and the pink of her hanfu is deeper. She has the nerve to wear gold and silver on her robes, as *if she were someone important.* Shen Yuan swallows the poison in his thoughts with his best polite expression. “So, it’s *you*. No servants, no guards? You must be very arrogant. Or just plain stupid.”

Shen Yuan blinks once. Then, he turns around without looking at her once and tries to make his steps in the opposite direction not feel like he's running. It's not like he can run, he has a cane, and the knowledge that whatever goddamn-fucking-harem plot *he didn't sign up* for means anyone who runs will end up accidentally tripping over themselves! Fuck!

Shen Yuan didn't actually sign up for this! He just wanted to read!

“You dare to ignore me?” He can clearly hear Xiao Gongzhu’s footsteps behind him. Shen Yuan grips his cane tightly. “My son told me how you humiliated him. In truth, when I heard all those servants talking, I thought it was a *joke.* Do you really think you have the *power* to hold the Emperor back? What love potion did you use, what artifact…? You know that *none* of it will work forever, don’t you? And when it wears off, there will be a place for you in that dungeon, or *rather*, in my father’s prison…”

Shen Yuan sighs, exhausted. Xiao Gongzhu quickens her steps, her hand a fierce thing, gripping his arm so tightly it hurts. Shen Yuan is grateful that he doesn't have long hair. In truth, he's sure she wouldn't mind grabbing someone by the hair for a fight!

“Answer me!” she demands. Shen Yuan turns around at the struggle she gives him. He is shocked to find her face pink, shining, eyes clearly troubled by *something.* Shen Yuan couldn’t be more lost if he tried. What the *hell*? Clearly, she’s furious, but what the hell is going through her head that Shen Yuan’s mere presence could unsettle her so much? So weird! “Do you think you’ll have him forever? *I* am the mother of his *firstborn*. I gave him his First Prince, and you’ve just been left to take care of that pathetic little cultivator’s brat’s *leftovers…”*

Shen Yuan thinks, for a second, that Luo Binghe is suddenly after him. At least, it seems that way, because Xiao Gongzhu cuts off his intended threatening or insulting sentence mid-sentence with a sharp intake of breath. Her face pales. The pink flushes of emotion on her cheeks lose color.

Shen Yuan stares coldly at her until Xiao Gongzhu looks away, frightened.

Luo Binghe isn't actually there, Shen Yuan realizes as he turns to continue walking before wasting more time on the dumb wife. Seriously, he's going to complain to Luo Binghe about this! Can he please keep him away from stupid harem plots? He just wanted some books! Is that too much to ask?

“Do you dare to…”

Shen Yuan takes a sharp breath when he feels a whip crack behind him. His belt feels like a ghostly oppression, the wild instinct to step aside and survive pricking at his nerves.

Immediately after, a burning sting flares across his arm as the golden cord snakes around his sleeve and yanks hard, dragging him like a hooked fish. Every joint in his arm screams in pain, his balance nearly gone. Shaking, jaw clenched to keep from screaming, all he wants to do is run away.

Ha! As if he's capable of...

Well, he's *not* capable of *running* away. But he’s not the only one with an unsteady center of gravity in the room.

Xiao Gongzhu wields her whip, that ridiculous, shiny, golden thing, with a determined and furious expression. Shen Yuan stumbles closer, pain sparking up his arm where the whip digs in, and acts before he can think better of it. More desperate than deliberate, he swings his cane in a wide arc, catching Xiao Gongzhu’s ankles with a sharp, graceless *crack*.

The sound of Xiao Gongzhu hitting the floor is abrupt. She gasps—half shrieking, half outraged—as the whip slackens out of her hand from the shock. Shen Yuan, panting, jams his cane against her shoulder to keep her down. His palms sweat, and his wrist hurts *so much* that it probably sprained.

Cold sweat drips down his back. He’s not made for this! His cane shakes with the effort, his whole arm is trembling, and yet here she is—on the ground, face red with embarrassment and eyes furious. Well, Shen Yuan can congratulate himself! He just makes his first fucking enemy in Luo Binghe's fucking harem!! What shit!!

He’ll never leave Sha Hualing or Luo Binghe's side again, damn it!

But, *well*. He’s playing some kind of role here, so he forces himself to speak in his coldest, most stern tone of voice—the disappointed tone he uses with his Meimei when she does something really bad—and says:

“For someone trained in Huan Hua Palace, let alone the *daughter* of the Old Palace Master, isn’t Xiao Gongzhu *still a bit too sloppy* with her footwork, just like when she was that young disciple always tripping and endangering her shixiongdi by catching her ankles in traps or being knocked down by beasts because of her lack of balance?” He forces himself to speak with dignity, keeping his voice from sounding as drained as that little confrontation has left him. “Truly, one would believe that after so many years of being a victim of her faulty center of gravity, unable to even use a sword because you couldn’t balance its weight, *you would learn* to tread firmly. Or did being a wife cloud your brain so much that you forgot where you came from and the teachings you’ve been given?”

Having read a few hundred words of PIDW means he not only knows Luo Binghe's entire story, but also a few other minor details of many other extras. It is always ironic to everyone in the forum comments that Xiao Gongzhu is a wild woman wielding a whip, but she always ends up "coincidentally" falling down, humiliated by a trap, a root wrapped around her ankle, a vine dragging her down... repeated clichés of the in dangerous wife-to-be where only her loved one could rescue her!

Luo Binghe is definitely not here to rescue her now. Xiao Gongzhu lets out a ferocious shriek. Her hand shoots out to catch Shen Yuan's cane, but Shen Yuan quickly steps back, so she just swipes at the air. It's almost theatrical and absolutely hilarious, perfectly timed, as the string of one of her beaded bracelets snaps, and the mound of beads clatters to the ground, making her groan as she puts her hand down, trying to push herself up from the imbalance of scattered jewels and heavy fabric and gauze that tangle beneath her elbows.

Also, with perfect timing:

"Noble Consort Shen," Zi-Zhao's helpful voice now enters the library beside him. Shen Yuan takes three steps back in doubt before turning to look at Zi-Zhao, who looks completely calm, as if seeing one of Luo Binghe's wives on the floor on the verge of throwing a tantrum is a normal thing. Maybe it was. "This humble one has informed Third Wife Sha. Has *Noble and Favored Consort* Shen found what he was looking for yet? Does he wish to return?"

It sounds a little more like a suggestion than a question, and Shen Yuan laughs a little, nodding his head, relieved. What does it matter what Zi-Zhao calls him if she has come to rescue him!! Ha! Who needs an Emperor coming to the rescue when he has the best servant!?

His servant has her hand on the hilt of her sword as she throws a cold look at Xiao Gongzhu, and guides Shen Yuan out of the library with her calm expression. Shen Yuan is sure he'll give her a tip, even if it's just a full box of Pocky.

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They walk calmly back to the garden. Only then, when Shen Yuan has to continue maneuvering with his left hand because his right one is so painful, does Shen Yuan have to tell Sha Hualing that he had a *little run-in* with Xiao Gongzhu that resulted in his wrist now being the size of a small tangerine, causing the Saintess Demon herself to stand up in a rage and storm out the garden gate. She doesn't wield a sword, and brings Mu Qingfang to him first, and Shen Yuan is grateful for both—perhaps more for one than the other.

"It's just bent," Mu Qingfang explains after examining it. Chengle is already pouting profusely in his lap. His eyes are watering, and Shen Yuan has discovered that it seems to pain his son more than himself to see him hurt. Seriously, it's just a bent wrist! It's not even a sprain! It could be a hundred times worse! It's almost laughably easy to bend a wrist with a cane! "Luckily, this Mu can take care of it. This one has an ointment that works perfectly…"

The ointment turns out to be a xianxia version of corydalis yanhusuo, which is like the plant on steroids, as it relieves almost all of the inflammation within five minutes. Still, Mu Qingfang bandages his wrist with a force that perhaps hurts more than the inflammation itself, demanding that he keep it firm and immobilized for the next day before another application of the ointment. He also brings him a tea for the pain, and another herbal blend for him to drink later that, he warns, will leave him drowsy and groggy for a long time.

Chengle has tears in his eyes when Mu Qingfang leaves.

"It's my fault," his child complains, sniffling, his mouth trembling. "I promised I'd take care of Baba! And I didn't do it!"

“Love,” Shen Yuan said, pulling his child into a tight hug. “I promise it was nothing.”

“But she *hurt you*!” Chengle already has glistening tears streaming down his face. Anhe, sitting a little farther away, lets out a sigh and starts searching his pockets for a handkerchief. Shen Yuan is touched that the boy is already prepared for all of Chengle’s tears. “She was *mean*, and I couldn’t take care of Baba Yuan. She hurt you!”

“It wasn’t like that. It was my own fault,” Shen Yuan sighs. He accepts the handkerchief Anhe hands him, and only when he’s wiped Chengle’s face a little, his cheeks burning with embarrassment, does Shen Yuan clear his throat and say, “Well, she was being very rude. She said things that made me mad, and I *may* have tripped her with my cane. I used too much force, and this happened.”

Chengle's tears freeze in the middle of falling. His mouth opens in an 'o' of surprise.

"Did she fall *badly*?" And his eyes, previously shining with tears, are now bright with emotion. His little nose is still red from crying, but even though he's hiccuping a little, he doesn't seem ready to cry anymore. "Did Baba *beat her*?"

“It was self-defense!” Shen Yuan apologizes quickly, embarrassed. After all, if he didn’t do anything, well, he probably would have been the one on the ground! “And it’s not something I’m going to do again. *Ever*.”

Anhe moves closer to Shen Yuan. Chengle seems eager for more details, so Shen Yuan avoids repeating any of the horrendous things Xiao Gongzhu was saying and tells the children a summary of what happened and why it's so important to have good footing when confronting someone.

Anhe then asks what proper footing looks like then, and Shen Yuan may have never practiced martial arts, but he's actually seen enough Ming-ge competitions to be able to spot when someone doesn't have good foot posture! He's *almost* certain he can help correct one!

He tries to explain this to the children. Chengle catches on much faster, and then the children are just playing back and forth, chasing each other with twigs as swords and attacking each other in a kind of fencing game where whoever is touched by the other loses. Shen Yuan relaxes at the sight of them both glowing and playing, even though the game stops every five or six minutes or so when Anhe feels his hair is amiss. Still, as he fixes his hair a bit, Chengle scampers around him, willing to keep playing even if he has to wait for it.

Sha Hualing returns with a triumphant smile.

“Tell me you didn’t bite her,” Shen Yuan begs. Sha Hualing bursts out laughing and gives Shen Yuan a small golden earring. *Thank goodness,* it doesn’t come with any piece of ear or blood attached. Shen Yuan is sure he’d lose even more of his sanity if it did.

“This Lingling would have brought you a lock of her hair, but humans consider it *uncivilized*,” Sha Hualing says, looking at her nails with a curl of her upper lip. “I’ve brought Mingyan the hair from the bitches who dared to speak ill against her, and she always looked at it as if she didn’t know what to do with it. *Humans*. Bah.”

Shen Yuan, despite everything, laughs.

“And what was she supposed to do with that?” he hums. Sha Hualing snorts.

“Well, braid it into her hair!” she says, frustrated, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Probably, in Sha Hualing’s demonic ways, it was. “Make a hair clip? Encapsulate them in crystal? Show off her triumphs, prove that she doesn’t even need to lift a finger to beat all those bitches! But no! *‘A-Ling, I appreciate it, but you don’t need to fight for* me’!” and Sha Hualing repeats the words in a high-pitched voice. Shen Yuan covers his mouth with his hand to keep from laughing out loud at a clearly bad and mocking imitation. “Obviously *I know that.* Mingyan can kick my ass and this Lingling would *appreciate it.* She’s capable and so strong and agile! But she can also use this Lingling for it! Do you know how many times we’ve had that argument? Like a hundred!”

Sha Hualing complains and rants a bit more. Then, she seems to realize that her daughter is too quiet, and luckily, after burning through all the sugar, she finds her asleep and not making a mess. With her daughter asleep against her chest, Sha Hualing speaks in a more normal, almost hushed tone of voice, without shouting or making loud gestures.

Shen Yuan is listening to the story of how Sha Hualing hunted a rare bird that was thought to be extinct, but she was sure *wasn't* (or, if it wasn't, *she* had just made them extinct, which is honestly quite an accomplishment for a Saintess Demon) when they both not-so-subtly glance at a person entering the gardens.

“Younger Sister Qin,” Sha Hualing whispered, then with a wide, savage smile, “Do you want me to bite her?”

“Please no,” says Shen Yuan. Sha Hualing laughs at him.

With the younger Qin sister, Qin Wanrong, a boy peeks out from behind her skirts. Shen Yuan recognizes the boy, who is Anhe's age and had smiled at him when Shen Yuan took the sword from Yaozuo. He is now dressed in soft autumn-colored robes, and there is no wooden sword tied to his belt.

Mother and son move forward and sit on one of the stone benches near the entrance to the gardens. Shen Yuan assumes they're just hanging out and continues asking Sha Hualing about her adventures; Sha Hualing is a wild thing, full of hunts that sound more like suicide attacks than simple beast hunts: single-handedly charging into an entire herd of Purple Horned Elephants, obtaining Chimera-Reptilian eggs so she can harvest jewels from their silver shells, and things as silly as trips to the market to obtain silk turning into big, arduous fights with Giant Red Shroudworms, creatures more disgusting than dangerous, just to obtain the best quality naturally red silks.

Shen Yuan is distracted enough that he doesn't notice Qin Wanrong and her son move seats closer until Sha Hualing points it out, and then another closer seat after that, until Shaoshao wakes up, steals one of Sha Hualing's bracelets, and runs off with the bracelet in her mouth. Sha Hualing gets to her feet and runs after her, but the little savage runs away at full speed, so unless Sha Hualing has more strategy than brute force, her current hunt for her own daughter is doomed for now.

Then, Qin Wanrong is standing right in front of him, with her little boy at her side. She bows respectfully, and the little boy looks at his mother before doing the same.

“Noble Consort Shen,” Qin Wanrong greets. Her face is lighter in makeup, and she wears less ornate jewelry than other wives Shen Yuan has seen so far. Even her robes are a bit more modest. “May this one take a seat next to you?”

“I don’t…” Shen Yuan sighs deeply, pinching the bridge of his nose. He’s frankly fed up. He’ll put up a damn sign with his picture on it that says in big letters ‘NOT A NOBLE CONSORT.’ He sighs again. “Yes, fine. You may sit.”

Qin Wanrong does so. Her little boy does the same. Shen Yuan notices the boy kicking his feet in the air with a small smile he can't help but have. He's clearly another little Binghe, with his thick hair slicked back in a ponytail held up by a golden bow, and his dark, glittering eyes.

“This Qin doesn’t mean to be disrespectful,” she begins, her tone humble. “But this one’s son has informed her about how you confronted the Eldest Prince, First Prince Yaozuo.”

“Oh,” Shen Yuan said, once again feeling infinitely embarrassed. He inclines his head to the boy, who is staring at his feet in the air as if they are the most interesting thing in the world, before looking back at Qin Wanrong, whose eyes are expectant. “Yes, well. It was something that had to be done. I spoke to Binghe about it, and he promised he’d have a talk with Yaozuo and his mother, but I have no idea how that will turn out. The way he treated the other children wasn’t nice at all.”

Qin Wanrong looks a little stunned for a moment. Then, a small smile appears on her face.

“This one knows,” she hums. Her expression remains cautious. “First Prince Yaozuo is a… rude child. My Shijie hasn’t done things properly with him, and this Qin knows this and has spoken to her older sister about it, but none of us has had the strength or power to do anything before out of respect and… more than Shijie causes. That’s why this Qin wishes to thank you.”

“Huh?” Shen Yuan tilts his head. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Not only did you have the courage to rein in the child, but you also confronted Xiao Gongzhu and won at her own game,” Qin Wanrong hums. There’s a hint of malicious delight in her eyes. “Walls have eyes, and books have ears, Noble Consort Shen. There are no secrets in our Emperor’s gardens.”

Shen Yuan sighs. He rubs his face wearily. Perhaps it's the right time to take the herbal dosage to make him drowsy. Seriously, *seriously*. He didn't sign up for harem plots, he just wanted to watch Chengle play and be happy with his mother and siblings. Is it so hard to have something without having to get involved in the whole big mess?

“This Qin knows that the Noble Consort could say no, and this one would understand if he didn’t wish to permit it,” Qin Wanrong says gently. “But this one would wish that, instead of

First Prince Yaozuo, her son the Young Prince Fuliang would play with Young Prince Chengle from now on."

Shen Yuan looks at the boy. It's clear where he shares his similarities with his mother: his eyes are big; his face is rounder as well. His forehead is slightly broader, and the tip of his nose is more upturned. He also has an adorable gap from a lost tooth. However, the shape of his mouth, the embarrassed bright red of his ears, and the way he nervously scrunches his hands together, even though he's pretending not to, seem so Luo Binghe-like that Shen Yuan finds it hard not to reach out and pat the anxious boy's head.

"It's not something I should decide," Shen Yuan finally says. He looks over to where Chengle is now sitting, probably telling a story, while Anhe is braiding his hair away from his face. It probably won't last long, but Anhe seems extremely focused on it, and it's one of the most adorable expressions he's ever seen on his face. "Chengle is free to decide who he does and doesn't want to play with. I can't force him to play with someone if he doesn't want to. Besides," he adds, just in case. "Chengle and I are just visiting. We'll come back another time, but we're not staying."

"Oh," Qin Wanrong's face looks disappointed. Her eyes almost watered as she bowed her head. "This one apologizes for her audacity. Please excuse me…"

"I didn't say no," Shen Yuan says quickly. Qin Wanrong stops. "I think if Prince Fuliang wants to play with Chengle, he should ask him himself. Nicely. And see if Chengle is willing."

Luo Fuliang looks nervous. He's clearly a bit younger than Anhe, but Shen Yuan still sees him as a very small child in a slightly larger body. He doesn't seem to have matured as much as his brother, and the way he slouches over, trying to blend in, makes it clear that he doesn't particularly like having to do anything on his own.

However, he couldn't be a Luo if he weren't brave. The boy puffs out his chest with a deep breath and nods, jumping off the bench to the ground to stand right in front of Shen Yuan. His face beams.

"I want to play with Chengle," he says firmly. Shen Yuan feels his cheeks burn as he tries to suppress his smile. "He's always good and shares his toys and tells funny stories. Yaozuo doesn't like him because his mother is always with him and is kind and doesn't force him to do anything if he doesn't want to. Yaozuo was very happy when Chengle's mother lost her soul." And apparently, he wouldn't be a Qin if he couldn't control his gossipy mouth, because even when Qin Wanrong covers her mouth in scandal, the boy, being only a boy, keeps talking. "But I want to play with him. Can I go ask him if I can play with him, Noble Consort Shen? I promise I'll be good! I won't cry if he says no!"

Shen Yuan has to take a deep breath to stop the aggressive tenderness from pinching his cheeks. He blames Sha Hualing entirely for giving him the habit.

"Call me Young Master Shen," he begs the boy, who nods quickly. "And you can go. Be a good boy, and he'll want to play with you."

The boy bows so deeply he almost loses his balance. Then he immediately stands up and runs over to where Chengle and Anhe are. They are so far away that Shen Yuan can't hear their words, but he can see both children tense, clearly expecting something negative. Anhe relaxes his shoulders before Chengle does, and Chengle seems to hesitate a little before inviting him to sit next to him.

No more than five minutes later, the three children are passing the jiggling ball around, which constantly changes colors because Fuliang is an exceedingly clumsy child, constantly falling and knocking the ball over. The boy doesn't cry or complain: he stands up every time, with a determined expression and a wide smile on his face.

Shen Yuan's heart burns.

And beside him, Qin Wanrong is crying.

“Oh, sorry, I think I have a handkerchief around here somewhere.” Shen Yuan starts rummaging through his sleeves. He’s sure he has one of the handkerchiefs Anhe offered him to wipe Chengle’s tears! But Qin Wanrong denies it, taking out a handkerchief of her own to wipe her face.

“It’s so beautiful to see him so happy,” she sobs. “I rarely get to see him like this. With Prince Yaozuo, you see, Noble Consort Shen, he looks so… small and weak. He never smiles, and he’s scolded when he does. Doesn’t he seem to be shining now? Like a tiny ray of sunshine?”

Shen Yuan watches as Chengle runs to help Fuliang up this time. The boy accepts the hand with a beaming expression. Then they both run off, tossing the ball to each other with their hands, and Anhe groans with a horrified look on his face as the ball bounces over his head. Both children scamper away from where he can hit them with the ball, clearly willing to lose a point rather than take a hit in revenge for messing up his hair.

Chengle is a radiant sun. Shen Yuan thinks he has tears in his eyes when he says, “Yes. He looks so happy now.”

He thinks Qin Wanrong knows he's not talking about her son, but she politely doesn't say anything.

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Luo Binghe returns only when it’s later in the evening.

He is absent from the dinner. Shen Yuan nibbles around a light congee that apparently, Zi-Zhao claims, Luo Binghe has left prepared for him in case of emergency. An emergency that appears to be there, because the rest of the dishes, including Chengle's, are spiced meals from the cooks. His child fusses and pouts, but won't accept a single bite of the congee, insisting that Shen Yuan must eat.

Shen Yuan has been to the bathhouse in the Head Wives' Pavilion and had a moment of embarrassment when Sha Hualing had no qualms about practically stripping naked to drag her children with her and give them a bath after a long day of playing. Shen Yuan manages to

escape fully clothed, only pleading with Chengle to accept Sha Hualing's bath, that he will take care of removing his jingling braids if she does for him, before running away.

Tired, sore, with a wrist that hurts more now than it did at noon, and stiff muscles, Shen Yuan manages to reach his assigned rooms. He flops down on his bed for at least ten minutes without doing anything before calling for a servant. It's not Zi-Zhao, but the servant seems overly eager to do his bidding, making a great pile of bows and nearly running down the hall when Shen Yuan asks him to please prepare a bathtub of hot water and the assortment of herbs Luo Binghe ordered for his bath the night before. His room is swarmed by servants bringing in buckets of water, oils, and boxes of herbs, and they prepare a warm bath that relieves at least some of his general pain.

Already bathed, with a constant headache, Shen Yuan asks (this time to Zi-Zhao, who seems to have run at Chengle's call from the other side of the palace. Shen Yuan thinks how ridiculous it would be if he got the demon servant some shoes with wheels to go from one place to another quickly and less tiringly) for some hot water to make tea. What better time to drink a tea that will leave him stupid than just as he is going to sleep?

He is more asleep than awake when Luo Binghe appears.

“Binghe?” he struggles, dazed. Luo Binghe is a shadowy silhouette, and only when Shen Yuan forces his eyes open a little wider does he gasp in horror. “My God, *what happened to you?*”

He almost tripped, running towards Luo Binghe. He didn't mind getting blood on his hands as he felt Luo Binghe's face, his neck, the deep tears on his robes. He didn't seem to have any open wounds.

“A-Yuan,” Luo Binghe murmurs. Shen Yuan touches his face, his forehead, the burning red zuiyin, his face boiling. He has a devilish fever, and Shen Yuan sighs. “A-Yuan, *A-Yuan…”*

“Aiya, you dummy,” Shen Yuan takes Luo Binghe from his arms. He staggers a little, hissing in pain as Luo Binghe grabs at his sore wrist, moving him to sit on the chair in front of the desk a little farther away. Luo Binghe slumps into the chair like dead weight, and Shen Yuan carries one of the wooden buckets with some water, trembling as he reaches over to wipe the blood with a cloth, especially from his face. Luo Binghe looks so far gone, his red eyes feverish and dazed, following his every action as Shen Yuan moves to wipe water onto his face, cleaning the blood away. There’s too much of it, dried into dark crusts, and Shen Yuan can see the water in the bucket getting darker and darker only for a lurch in his stomach that he ignores. “Are you alright? Were you hurt? What happened?”

“A-Yuan,” Luo Binghe says again, so thickly that the sound seems physical. Shen Yuan snorts as Luo Binghe rests his face on the handkerchief Shen Yuan is using to wipe it. His breathing is deep, not erratic, but he seems to be struggling. Shen Yuan sets the cloth aside and palms his ribs, looking for any exposed wounds or breaks, but finds nothing. Of course, as if some low-level villain could actually hurt the Protagonist—really, why is he even caring when…

Luo Binghe pulls at him. Shen Yuan lets out an indignant sound—which is actually also somewhat pained. Luo Binghe wraps his arms around him, his head buried against his chest.

"*A-Yuan*," Luo Binghe's voice reverberates like a growl. "What are you doing to me?"

"You're feverish, you big oaf," Shen Yuan growls. He pulls Luo Binghe's face away from his flat chest. Without those breasts that Luo Binghe would surely enjoy sheltering in the most like all those wives have, why else would he do something like that?! He presses the wet cloth against his cheeks. "Is your qi okay? I have no idea how to deal with that. How can I help you?"

Luo Binghe makes a sound like he'd been punched. He shakes his head. Shen Yuan sighs, running his hands through his hair and wincing when he finds more dried blood.

"Who did you fight?" he asks finally. He doesn't have enough clean water to wash away all that blood. Except for throwing Luo Binghe into his used bathwater, but that's wrong in so many ways that just thinking about it is horrifying!! "Did someone try to attack the palace? Or some enemy army to decimate? Traitors in your ranks? Demons from the west trying to reclaim territory? Go on, tell me. I won't be scared."

All he wants is to keep Luo Binghe talking. To check how coherent he is, to try to identify within his own recognition patterns how advanced the fever is. He may not know much about qi deviations or anything xianxia, but Shen Yuan thinks he knows enough about fevers.

Luo Binghe seems too stunned to reply at first. Then, weakly, as if ashamed to say it, he only says: "Xin Mo."

"Oh," Shen Yuan understands. He sighs, pouring more water over Luo Binghe's head, not caring how wet his pajamas are getting or how he's dripping more blood than water. At least it cleans the traces of dried blood from his hair and face, leaving only a feverish visage, burning bright eyes, and dry, parted lips. Luo Binghe has never looked so fragile in his eyes, and Shen Yuan can only cradle his face in his hands, not so far removed from that feverish, disoriented look Chengle had on that first night when he met him. "Oh, that damn sword. Is it sealed now?"

Luo Binghe nods. His eyes watery, his face pink, Shen Yuan feels his heart pressed against his throat.

"Good," he says, because he doesn't know what else to say, really. "Good," he repeats, and takes a deep breath. He has no other choice. "Come, come. Help me help you."

The bath water is already colder than lukewarm. Shen Yuan feels like he's manipulating a puppet that's too large and heavy with floppy limbs, which doesn't suit his own numb brain. He pushes Luo Binghe, wearing only his pants, into the water, and immediately turns a deep red. His hands tremble as he tries to scoop some water into his hands to run it down his forehead.

Luo Binghe catches his hand in midair, his eyes wide and worried. Shen Yuan notes that the bandage has now turned bloody, and sighs.

“I’m fine,” he says, and then, as if to lighten the mood: “I had a run-in with Xiao Gongzhu. Your wife! And I won,” and he laughs nervously. “Well, she was being *rude*. I’m sorry. I mean, I’m not sorry, she deserved it. Probably if I hadn’t, she would have stabbed me or something, but to be honest…”

Luo Binghe seems to only be half-listening to him. The water laps around him as Luo Binghe shifts, leaning back against the edge. His entire skin is flushed, feverish, and Shen Yuan feels an abrupt sound rise from his throat as Luo Binghe first presses his face into the palm of his hand, then his lips hover over his bandaged wrist, the touch of them burning. His breath against his skin raises goosebumps on his neck.

“Binghe,” he scolds, tense. Luo Binghe looks at him with those watery, shining eyes. The zuiyin on his forehead throbs, and Shen Yuan lets out a weary sigh as he runs his fingers over the red mark. It’s hot, much hotter than is healthy, and he actually feels a physical throbbing beneath his fingers. Shen Yuan sighs. “I'll bring Mu Qingfang.”

He doesn't even manage to move. Luo Binghe is clinging to him with both arms, trembling with fever. His grip isn't that strong, and Shen Yuan is sure he could pull away if he wanted to, but Luo Binghe is staring at him, his eyes filled with tears that stream down his face, skin feverish, lips trembling as he seems to search for words. Shen Yuan feels like he's falling apart, unable to even take a step away from him.

“Don’t go,” Luo Binghe says finally. His mouth opens, then closes, then opens again with another whisper, as soft as the sound of the wind. “Don’t leave me alone. *Please*…”

Shen Yuan sighs. He brushes his damp hair with his fingers.

“I won’t,” he promises. “But we need someone to help. I can’t do anything for you now.”

“You can,” Luo Binghe rushes, stumbling over his words, “you can, you can. Stay with me. Don’t leave me. Please. Please, *please*…”

Shen Yuan sighed angrily. He didn't move, and silently continued to clean Luo Binghe's face and hair as tears streamed down his face. He didn't seem to even realize how much he was crying, leaning his face against Shen Yuan's hands as he wiped away the tears, more tears replacing the ones he had just wiped away.

Shen Yuan manages to distance himself a little. The only herb he has is the tea he just made, which has left his head groggy. There's barely more than a cup’s worth left at the bottom of the teapot he made, and even though the water is more lukewarm than hot, he pours a cup to take to Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe doesn't even ask, he just lets Shen Yuan bring the cup to his mouth and drinks. He doesn't ask what's in it, doesn't hesitate. He doesn't believe Shen Yuan is going to poison him.

Shen Yuan feels like he could be burning on a pyre at that moment, and he would feel a lesser fire than the one that consumes him.

“Okay, stand up,” he says when the water is already too cold. Luo Binghe obeys like a battered puppet, splashing water in all directions as he climbs out. His pants drip a river onto

the floor, and his feet are wearing mismatched modern socks, one of each color. It's so ridiculously homey that Shen Yuan feels he might be the one crying now. "Careful. Cover yourself with this. I'll find… some clothes…"

Luo Binghe won't leave him, the giant, sticky bastard. He leaves a river of water running from the bathtub to the door leading to Luo Binghe's room, where Shen Yuan leaves him sitting on a chair while he laboriously searches through the large closet. He finds a pair of pants that don't look like they have armor on them and an inner robes that aren't see-through, and, with his ears red with embarrassment after being faced with a large pile of almost see-through fabric (he doesn't want to have the mental image of Luo Binghe wearing *any of that stuff*!!), he urges Luo Binghe to *please* not make him take off his pants and dresses him. He can do all of that for his child, not a grown man!!

Luo Binghe dresses clumsily. His skin is somewhat damp even after changing, and Shen Yuan sighs, drying his face and hair. His eyes are still watery.

"You're very tired, aren't you?" Shen Yuan murmurs. Luo Binghe nods, dopy. Shen Yuan sighs, gently smoothing the towel over his head as Luo Binghe settles on top of him, using his chest as a pillow while Shen Yuan gently dries his hair. "Aiya. Poor, poor Binghe. What a mean sword you have. It will see. I'll beat it up."

It's a silly thing that would probably have made Luo Binghe laugh in a better state of mind and body. But the Luo Binghe clinging to him now only lets out a sound like a sob, clinging to him as closely as his trembling, weak arms will allow.

"Don't leave me," he pleads, and Shen Yuan sighs. "Don't go. I don't want to be alone. A-Yuan, A Yuan, don't leave me alone."

Luo Binghe sobs some more. Shen Yuan coos as best he can, wiping away his tears, drying his hair, and keeping his fever under control. Whatever was in that big pile of xianxia herbs probably had a good effect, because Luo Binghe no longer has an uncontrollable fever. His skin is warmer, slightly sweaty, but no more than that. Shen Yuan pulls him up to urge him to his feet, then plops him down onto the nest of pillows that is his giant gauze and silk-filled bed, the supporting protagonist in the whole big pile of PIDW orgies. Shen Yuan doesn't even want to look in the direction of that bed!! No, thanks!!

Luo Binghe collapses among the anachronistic sheets and pillows. Shen Yuan doesn't even have a chance to move away before Luo Binghe pulls him away.

"Don't leave me," he begs again, his bright eyes watering. "Please, please don't…"

"I'm not leaving," Shen Yuan sighs. "Just… let me do something first, okay? Look at me, I'm soaked! I'm going to get sick!" He points to his pajamas, which Luo Binghe has splashed with bloody water already cooling against his skin. He needs to change now before he has a mini-collapse in bloody water drying himself. Fuck. He'll never be able to wear those pajamas again. Shen Yuan pushes back his hysteria before it even starts with a sharp intake of breath, willing everything to stop spinning around him.

Clearly reluctantly, Luo Binghe lets him go. His gaze is like that of a pitiful puppy that Shen Yuan sees through the window as he walks away on his way to work. He has to focus on his footsteps, take a breath, and walk back along the soaked path without slipping. From his room, he changes his clothes as quickly as he can to the first robes he finds dry and soft and breaks the edge of the talisman Zi-Zhao has given him to call her. Lacking qi of his own, how wonderful a talisman that sends out a qi signal every time it breaks!

He gulps down the last of the tea straight from the teapot, praying it will ease the pain he'll feel from the horror of having Luo Binghe almost dragging him around. He can barely feel anything but dizziness and numbness, his eyes so heavy he feels he'll fall asleep standing up, but it's a good thing he stays awake, because when Zi-Zhao arrives, she's carrying Chengle on her back.

“Baba Yuan!” The boy looks up at him with big, scared little eyes. Shen Yuan has no idea what state his face is in, but it must be really bad because Chengle jumps from the servant’s grasp (really, Shen Yuan *is going* to give her something. Something big. Whatever she likes) straight to him. Shen Yuan greets the bathed, braided boy with a big hug. “Is Baba okay?”

“Ah, I am,” Shen Yuan pats the boy’s head. He has braids now, but no clinking beads, so it’s better. “Ah, Zi-Zhao, sorry if it’s a bother. Could you please clean up here? It’s… a big mess.”

Zi-Zhao stares at the bloody water on the ground with a strangely worried expression. Then, her eyes turn to Shen Yuan, clearly shocked. Even her face looks paler.

“It’s just water! Sorry, it’s really dirty,” he says quickly. He knows it looks murky and suspicious, but he’d never be able to stab Luo Binghe or anything! All that blood probably isn’t even his! Damn! “Would it be too much to ask…?”

“Not at all, Young Master Shen. Allow this humble one,” the servant enters. She seems to relax to see that the blood isn’t coming from anyone else in the room, and Shen Yuan can only rejoice in the servant’s loyalty. Good employee! He hopes she gets a good paid vacation and the xianxia equivalent of medical insurance. At the very least.

Chengle looks at Luo Binghe on the bed with a sulking expression. Shen Yuan is too sleepy to really feel any pain as he bends down on the floor.

“Baby,” he murmurs, and the boy looks at him with a big pout. “Your father had a qi deviation… I think. It’s not *that* serious, but he is in bad shape right now.” The boy doesn’t stop pouting, but his brows are no longer so furrowed. Chengle looks at the bed, where his father now looks more out of it than awake, his little face more worried than angry. “Tomorrow, we’re both going to tell him off. We’ll both get really mad at him, and he’ll have to beg for forgiveness and do a lot of things to make us like him again. But for now, is it okay if we take care of him?”

Chengle pouts more. He hesitates a little, and whatever he sees on Luo Binghe's face, lying half passed out on the bed, seems to be enough to make his sweet boy nod firmly, his big eyes shining with determination.

“It’s okay. I can help,” says Chengle, his brave little boy, and Shen Yuan couldn’t love him more.

Zi-Zhao cleans silently. Chengle climbs onto the bed with a cold cloth and presses it (a bit rudely, Shen Yuan thinks) against his father's face. Luo Binghe grimaces, opening his eyes with an absolutely stunned expression.

“Chengle,” Shen Yuan scolds gently. The boy sighs and becomes more careful as Shen Yuan fetches cups. Zi-Zhao reaches for fresh water before shutting herself in the next room to clean everything up, and Shen Yuan fills one of the cups and holds it to Luo Binghe’s mouth, who drinks again without question or hesitation. Water trickles down the corner of his mouth, and Chengle wipes it away. Then, his large eyes look up at Shen Yuan, seeking approval. Shen Yuan gives it to him with a smile. “That’s it. Pretty boy, good job my love.”

Luo Binghe stirs, a whining sound rising from his throat. Shen Yuan steps back slightly, but Luo Binghe barely seems to move. The whine repeats itself, and then Shen Yuan notices that he’s trying to speak. Luo Binghe tries a few more times before managing a, “*Chengle*?”

Chengle looks at him with his sad little eyes. Luo Binghe moves his hand toward him, but even that movement seems to be difficult for him. Chengle pushes his hand away anyway, his face sulking.

“I don’t like it,” his child complains. “I care because you matter to Baba. And he cares about you. But I’m angry!”

“Very angry,” Luo Binghe says with difficulty. His eyes are still cloudy. “It’s fine if you hate me.”

Chengle slaps him on his arm. The slap sprays water everywhere as he hits him with the cloth. Shen Yuan doesn't even get to beg him to behave when the boy says, "*I don't hate you*!"

Luo Binghe falls silent. His mouth opens, but the boy hits him again with his wet cloth. Shen Yuan can see the tears glistening, not yet falling.

“I don’t like you,” Chengle says, sniffing. His pot trembles. “I don’t like it here. I don’t like it when Father Emperor is more emperor than father. I don’t like it when Father Emperor wants to steal Baba Yuan away or when he has those ugly eyes. But Father Emperor behaves well and is good sometimes and I’m not afraid of him and I don’t hate him. Even if he lies. And even if he wants to marry Baba and steal him away from me. And it *hurts*.” And his boy wrings out the wet cloth with nervous hands. Shen Yuan’s vision is blurry, and he has to wipe the tears from his face before he becomes the third crybaby in the room. “It hurts because I love Father, and I want him to love me the way I do! I want to be important! I want Father to love me the way Mom loved me before the baby and the way Baba loves me because *that’s how I love him!*”

His boy finally bursts into tears. Shen Yuan reaches out for him, but Luo Binghe does too, catching him. Chengle cries harder, squirming only a little in Luo Binghe's embrace, and

Shen Yuan almost has to climb up to them so he can hug his crying boy even tighter, as if this hug between them is pushing all the right buttons to make him cry and cry.

“I love you,” Luo Binghe says, his voice brittle and trembling at the edges. Shen Yuan can feel the dam in his eyes overflowing, crying silently. “I don’t… I don’t know how to do this right. *I want* to do this right. For you. For your siblings. Because I love you. Because I love them. I want this family. I want to be better for all of you.”

Chengle cries harder. Even despite his feverish state, or perhaps because of it, when Luo Binghe looks at him, Shen Yuan can see that his face is far more peaceful than he's seen in… really, since they were in the apartment, as if the palace's rigid borders were holding him prisoner.

“*I love you*,” Luo Binghe repeats to Chengle, and the boy sobs even louder. “Please, let me be family with you.”

Chengle doesn't respond. He doesn't deny, he doesn't shout, he doesn't nod. He just clenches Luo Binghe's robes tightly in one of his fists, and tugs at Shen Yuan's robes with the other, holding them both as if he's afraid that letting go would mean losing that moment, losing that safe embrace of the two parents who love him.

His baby boy cries until he runs out of tears, hiccuping and trembling. Sips of water later, Chengle sleeps using Luo Binghe as a pillow, tiny hiccups making him tremble even in his sleep. He looks so small, his tiny hands scrunching up Luo Binghe's robes, his cheeks bright red. Yet with Luo Binghe's hands cradling him protectively, he also looks safe.

His face looks a little less feverish. Shen Yuan measures the temperature on his forehead and is flooded with relief to notice that it seems to have decreased.

“Stay,” Luo Binghe says. Despite his improvement, his eyes are still somewhat cloudy, but now dark again.

Shen Yuan sighs. “And where would I go?” he complains, half jokingly and half seriously, before pulling a pillow closer and settling in so he can be near Chengle if the boy wakes up in the night. His whole body throbs with relief as he relaxes.

Luo Binghe doesn't respond. Shen Yuan pulls one of the blankets up to cover the three of them a bit, especially Chengle's back. Only when his boy is finally perfectly comfortable does Shen Yuan allow himself to relax and put the entire catastrophic day behind him. And *what* a bad day it has been.

With everything he's done and how hard he's worked, Shen Yuan is absolutely certain that the next day will be *worse*.

Chapter End Notes

SHL: *clearly specifies how she uses demonic courtship techniques on her wife*
SY: Wow, what a great friendship you two have. What a surprise that two of Binghe's wives get along so well :o

LBH, looking directly at SY: I love /you/
SY: Of course he says it to Chengle-

Denial is a river in Egypt, your unreliable narrator is gay (I'm sure I used that exact phrase in another author's note at some point)
CHENGLE HAS ACQUIRED A NEW NON-HATEFUL BROTHER. CHEERS FOR THE KIDS!!! There are some out there who might still be a little confused about what to do, but here comes our Noble Consort and Future Empress to set things right ;D
Also, maybe the foolish, neglectful Father Emperor earned a few points by pouring his heart out like that. A few. Will that be enough? :3

At this point, we're going something like SY 1 - LPM 0. Who says the love interest halo isn't kicking in right now? SY and his closet, probably, where he doesn't get the damn signals that he's the Protagonist's love interest, and therefore things are potentially going well for him. Or being potentially plot triggers :P who knows

SY, arriving in the modern world with a bandaged wrist and the after-effects of overexerting himself physically, will have TOO MANY things to explain... or not? *checks next chapter notes* Hehehehehe..... WELL, AT LEAST HE'LL HAVE AN INTERESTING STORY TO TELL AIRPLANE. BESIDES TELLING HIM ABOUT THOSE KISSES, WHEN HE HAS ENOUGH BRAIN TO PROCESS IT :P

It's still funny that so many of you are getting the Qijiu baby right here, and at the same time, I can't say anything without giving spoilers *internal screams*
ANYWAY. THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING. I hope you liked the chapter!!! I had a lot of fun writing it, I love harem dramas XD YOU KNOW!! Kudo-interaction-comment!! I'm so grateful to have fun together in the comments, because it's EXTREMELY entertaining to hang out with you!! I love you all so much, thanks for making my days better MWAH
See you soon!! :D

Chapter 32: Second versions of the same old story

Chapter Notes

HELLO! :P WOW, WE'RE FINALLY AT THIS CHAPTER. I'M *SO* EXCITED FOR ALL THE CIRCUMSTANCES YOU'RE GOING TO SEE NEXT!!!!
Funny thing, this chapter was only supposed to be 6k. The next 2k are just the plot that told me "bitch, did you forget me?" and it had to happen. I'm just as surprised as you guys, I swear

Beta-readed by Boo!! You can find her on Tumblr and AO3! :D She's really doing the BEST and receiving files from me at 1am, I'm so sorry XD Send her energy, love, support and strength, she deserves it!!!

Chapter warnings: Shen Yuan™, non-graphic mentions of: death, what happened last summer (aka Cang Qiong on PIDW), torture, very poor physical and mental health upon direct exposure. And lots of cursing

Enjoy the chapter :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan wakes up and knows immediately that it's the worst day he's had in *months*. Not only does every part of his body hurt like he's been hit by a truck, but when he takes a deep breath, all he can feel is his throat feeling tight and dry. His nose is also completely blocked, not allowing a single breath to pass through, and even the smallest effort to breathe makes his lungs burn.

He doesn't even have the strength to complain out loud. He tries to turn his head, but everything is spinning around him so much that he feels nauseous from the sudden onset of vertigo. He's shaking, shivering, and so sick that he doesn't think he should get out of bed. Maybe he should text his ER and have them make an appointment with his doctor...? Although he's not entirely sure if he charged his phone last night...

When Shen Yuan wakes up again, it is because a little hand shakes him.

“Baba Yuan!” he can barely hear the voice, as if his ears were stuffed with cotton. He struggles to open his eyes, their lids heavy, unable to see anything but blurred colors; only a faint croak comes out of his mouth. Chengle? Oh shit, will he have to call Airplane to babysit again? “Baba, Baba…”

“I’m fine,” he struggles to speak. His throat feels raspy like sandpaper. “Can you… water?”

A massive force moves him. Shen Yuan doesn't even manage to finish being scared when he feels himself being resettled onto a large pile of fluffy pillows. It hurts enough to make him

moan and want to cry, but the truth is that the touches, though strong and painful due to the extreme level of sensitivity he has throughout his body, are... still gentle, somehow. The hand lingers a little longer on his back, with another softly brushing over his face as it seems to test the temperature of his forehead. It lingers there tenderly on his cheek as Shen Yuan struggles to breathe.

“Careful,” says the deep, raspy voice that makes Shen Yuan’s hair stand on end. Then, something cold settles on his lower lip. Shen Yuan lets the water go down his throat, and each swallow hurts. “How bad does A-Yuan feel?”

Shen Yuan can't even manage to respond verbally. He assumes that in itself is an answer.

He falls asleep a little while after that. He's vaguely aware of sounds, but he can't really remember them. Talking? And Chengle? Had he called Airplane, or had he just imagined that?

“Okay, Shen Gongzi, this one needs you to open your mouth,” says a voice with a gentle lilt that Shen Yuan somewhat registers. He opens his mouth, stunned and still dizzy. His entire face scrunches up when what enters his mouth isn’t a thermometer or a pill, but a horrendous liquid that tastes awfully bitter, and runs down his throat like bile. Despite everything, he swallows it, shuddering with disgust. It’s difficult to swallow, and his mouth is left filled with a still-bitter aftertaste.

There are more voices. They lull him to sleep. Someone says, “Your Baba Yuan will be safe. I promise.” Chengle, his sweet boy, is saying something, but Shen Yuan is asleep before he can comprehend.

He has dreams that feel like nightmares, nightmares that fade into dreams. At some point, he's sure he's dreaming of an argument that escalates until his face scrunches up in pain, his ears ringing.

He hears soft words, a familiar cadence as someone pushes something that feels more like an actual pill than more medicine of dubious origin. Shen Yuan isn't even fully aware of whether or not he's drinking water to swallow it.

Another feverish dream sweeps him away like a rising tide. It suffocates him, drowns him, and sinks him deep under.

Shen Yuan sleeps, lulled by nightmares he doesn't understand and dreams that envelop him like a warm blanket, easing a terror he isn't sure he understands.

⋆ ⋅ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋅ ⋆ ⋅

He wakes up feeling a little more stable, what feels like an eternity later. When Shen Yuan opens his eyes, they don't feel like lead. He doesn't know what time it is, but it must be much past noon, given how horrendously hungry he feels, with a hollow pit in his stomach, and the cramped feeling in his muscles from having been in the same position for too long.

Then he comes across soft sheets he doesn't recognize, the canopy of a wide bed draped with gauze, and his stomach twists in a moment of panic at waking up in an unknown place. With a gasp of air that rasps through his throat, little by little, he's hit by memories of the past few days. With a hysterical laugh that sounds like a sob, he relaxes into Luo Binghe's bed, where he'd practically fainted from exhaustion after being drugged with a bunch of herbs the night before, just after helping him with his qi deviation.

That's the situation. Shen Yuan finds himself laughing like an idiot.

“A-Yuan?” And as if drawn by their muffled squawks, Luo Binghe appears. His robes are simpler, and he peers through the gauze canopy with slow movements. “How are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” Shen Yuan replies with a croak. Luo Binghe steps forward, touching his forehead and cheeks. Shen Yuan tries to stifle the itching lodged in his throat, but an absolutely horrendous cough tears out of him, making his eyes water with the effort. Ah, shit. He’d really gone too far. “And Chengle? How are you feeling after last night?”

Luo Binghe wears a small smile. He looks exhausted: dark circles like shadows on his pale face, but otherwise, his expression is steady as he says: “This Lord is feeling much better thanks to A Yuan’s care. Chengle is with Hualing and her children now, in the inner gardens of the imperial chambers nearby. He hasn’t wanted to stray too far.”

Shen Yuan relaxes. He allows Luo Binghe to guide another cup of water directly to his mouth and lets him check the temperature on his face again. He feels much less dizzy, though just as feverish.

“A-Yuan had a very high fever when Chengle woke up,” Luo Binghe explains. His brow furrows in worry. “A-Yuan has already taken some medicine, but he hasn’t woken up or shown any improvement until now. This Lord… was very worried.”

Shen Yuan sighs, tired, and then begins to sulk. Well, that's where his adventures with PIDW come to an end. Luo Binghe brushes his now messy hair away from Shen Yuan's face, keeping his hand there. His fingers feel icy, and Shen Yuan leans against them, almost shivering from the relief that a touch cold brings him.

“I'm glad it's only that,” he murmurs, and with only a hint of dark humor, he snorts. Despite his condition, he can't help but feel… relieved. In a stupid way. “For a moment, I thought I'd transmigrated. God, that was a fever scare. The *worst*.”

“Transmigrated?” And Luo Binghe, with his absolute seriousness, only makes Shen Yuan laugh a little more. Oh, is it the medicine? What had Mu Qingfang given him?

“Dying,” Shen Yuan simplifies, and Luo Binghe’s eyes snap open in horror. “It’s… ah, I don’t know if it’s a real thing,” and he shakes his head from side to side, laughing. Seriously, what’s *wrong* with him? What the *hell* kind of meds had Mu Qingfang given him, really? “It happens in a lot of novels I read. A poor fool like me dies, and then, *wow*, he opens his eyes and he’s inside a novel, or a video game, or a TV show… whatever!” His laugh rasps with a cough. He bends over painfully, and Luo Binghe helps him sit up so he can cough more

comfortably without choking. He's not even finished coughing when his laughter picks back up. "I didn't recognize the room and I thought… I thought…" he coughs and giggles again. His eyes are burning. Is he crying? He's not sure he's not completely delirious. "I thought I transmigrated. God, that would have been *shit.* I've never wanted to die *less* than I do now."

Luo Binghe seems to have frozen. There's a look of veiled horror on his face, his expression pale. The hand that has yet to leave his face is trembling.

"Is that something that *happens*?" Luo Binghe finally asks. He sounds choked. "Is the phenomenon of transmigration normal in A-Yuan's world?"

"Huh? No." Shen Yuan shakes his head. He tries to settle a little further, to return to the blankets. He's shivering, fully aware it's from the fever, but he can't help but long for the comfort of the bed and all the soft pillows. "No, no. It's fictional." And then, looking at Luo Binghe, who is also fictional and actually *isn't so fictional now*, he laughs again. "Though it might not be, actually…"

"This Lord is ignorant on such matters," Luo Binghe says. There's something odd about his expression, something that seems shaky around the edges. Luo Binghe fluffs up pillows behind him, forcing him to sit still, and Shen Yuan finds himself too dazed to do anything but let him arrange him like a doll between the blankets and pillows. "Could A-Yuan explain?"

Shen Yuan wonders if it's a feverish delirium, because it very well could be. Luo Binghe settles in next to him on the bed. Shen Yuan has no idea where he got that bowl of snow-white congee sprinkled with spring onions and a little ginger, but when Luo Binghe offers him a spoonful, Shen Yuan accepts it without complaint. It tastes exquisite, which is entirely to be expected, and it almost brings tears to his eyes.

He swallows his mouthful before saying:

"Well, I haven't read that many transmigration novels," he warns. It's not like he's an expert on the subject! It's not like it's his favorite genre, either, much less when they have horrible Systems forcing the protagonist to do things in pursuit of the plot when it's clear that following the linearity of the plot would entail a narrative disaster. "Well, I already said it. A character dies and wakes up in another body," he shrugs, or at least he tries to. The movement is painful. "Usually, it's a character in a novel, series, video game… anything that has had a deep connection with the transmigrator. I guess if someone dies reading something, it's very likely they'll transmigrate into it, narratively speaking."

And Luo Binghe proffers him another bite of congee. Shen Yuan accepts it willingly.

Two spoonsfulls later, Luo Binghe asks in an oddly tense voice: "And when a person transmigrates, must they act as the body that they now occupy?" His expression is hesitant. Shen Yuan takes another spoonful, allowing Luo Binghe to elaborate on his question. "What happens to the… original?"

"Hmm… it depends. Sometimes the original soul gets to co-pilot, other times their soul is lost. It depends on how evil the author wants to be." Shen Yuan tries to think of examples. None come to mind, but he assumes it's because his head feels too foggy to think. "Ah,

sometimes, Transmigrators have a System that forces them to be like the character in their new body. It's like… uh, like a phone screen, but only the transmigrator can see it? And it gives them missions and things to do. Sometimes it locks them into OOC mode." And at Luo Binghe's curious expression, Shen Yuan quickly explains the term OOC. Luo Binghe nods, understanding everything with his Protagonist's quick mental speed. So good, so clever! Shen Yuan would pat him on the head if he could move his hands! "Then, they'll be forced to act like the original character for a while."

"Of course… ," and Luo Binghe looks… a lot more horrified than Shen Yuan is sure would be appropriate for something that's just a common plot point. Well, he supposes it must be pretty gross for someone raised in a xianxia world! Things like occupying bodies and replacing identities are much more real in Luo Binghe's PIDW world than just a narrative device in Shen Yuan's world. "This Lord understands."

Shen Yuan laughs. He coughs again, and Luo Binghe hands him another cup of water before another spoonful of congee. Swallowing hurts, but he's too hungry, so he hardly cares.

"Whenever you say you understand, I feel like I get more confused," Shen Yuan complains. Luo Binghe looks at him, his eyebrows slightly raised, curious. "What do you understand? You make me dizzy."

Luo Binghe hands him another spoonful of congee. He seems to be pondering exactly what to say, until he replies:

"This Lord had often wondered what the difference was," he says, his voice strangely gentle. "What changed, and why? Was it something this Lord had done differently, something irredeemable about this one, something inherently horrendous? But between this Lord and that weak, foolish version of me, there was no difference at all. The same heritage, the same blood, the same history. Or *almost* the same. Had the difference always been that, after all?" And Luo Binghe laughs. His laugh is rich, low, a gentle melody that makes it impossible for Shen Yuan to stop looking at him. His pale skin seems to glow, shimmering, like a halo that catches the delicacy of his features. The beauty of his face could take anyone's breath away, and Shen Yuan is nothing more than a lowly mortal compared to someone worthy of the Gods.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he says. Luo Binghe laughs again. He reaches for another spoonful of congee, which Shen Yuan accepts. Four spoonsfulls later, Luo Binghe pushes the now-empty bowl away, and Shen Yuan watches him with a pout. His stomach still aches from hunger pangs, and the congee had been so delicious that he wouldn't mind having another bowl.

"A-Yuan wants to hear a story?" Luo Binghe asks. Shen Yuan stares at him, captivated like a moth to the flames of his gentle smile, the way his eyes narrow with a warm softness. Luo Binghe shifts closer, tucking Shen Yuan more comfortably between pillows. Everything spins a little less, but still, he feels Luo Binghe's icy touch against his feverish face. "I think A-Yuan might be interested."

"Sure," Shen Yuan hums. Luo Binghe smiles even wider.

“Good,” he says, and settles in. Shen Yuan feels himself immediately tipped closer by gravity, the bed sinking as Luo Binghe readjusts his weight. The pillow he rests his head on is quite firm and stiff, and Shen Yuan doesn’t quite understand where Luo Binghe’s hand, which seems to be constantly monitoring the temperature of his face, comes from, but it doesn’t bother him either. The touch of his fingertips is a great relief. “A-Yuan knows of the great deeds that are accomplished with Xin Mo, doesn’t he? The way that tears through reality itself, crossing over even to entirely different worlds.”

Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose. “Ugly sword,” he mutters, and Luo Binghe lets out a cheerful laugh.

“Even though it is an ugly sword,” he says, “it is true that Xin Mo is one of a kind. It has the ability to open a portal to the world of A-Yuan, so different from this one, or to worlds… much more similar.”

“Is that so?” Shen Yuan can’t help but ask. “Have you visited other worlds?” Luo Binghe's smile is a little strange now.

“Some,” he admits. “This Lord was unaware that the possibility existed, until one day, many months ago, when this Emperor found himself in a world where the realms had not been unified, and on top of Qing Jing Peak on the Cang Qiong Mountain, Shen Qingqiu was still alive.” Shen Yuan squints his face, trying to understand *what the fuck.*

“What the fuck,” he says, and Luo Binghe bursts out laughing. His laughter is rich, jovial, and tender. Shen Yuan feels dizzy, as if his brain is being tickled.

“This Lord thought similarly, at first,” Luo Binghe says, with a comfortable simplicity. “Cang Qiong was of its best days, disciples running around happily. The realms weren’t unified, this Lord’s empire wasn’t even fully forged. Vast territories still remained unconquered,” he narrates with a calm cadence. Luo Binghe’s knuckles tickle coolly against his cheek, and Shen Yuan shudders. “Does A-Yuan want to guess the most outrageous thing?”

“I bet I couldn’t,” Shen Yuan grumbles, wincing. Luo Binghe laughs, and Shen Yuan’s whole body trembles. Is he lying so close to the pillows Shen Yuan is leaning on? He’s too stunned to notice.

“In that world, there was *another* Luo Binghe,” Luo Binghe says, his voice low, an almost conspiratorial whisper. “Equal to this Lord in every way. In *almost* everything, that Luo Binghe was identical to this one.” Arching an eyebrow, Luo Binghe moves closer to him. Shen Yuan feels another shiver, but he can’t seem to tear his face away, feeling like a bird with broken wings caught in the mesmerizing gaze of a predator. “He held the title of Emperor, the title of Palace Master of Huan Hua Palace, and the loyalty of the entire palace, disciples and masters alike. Like this Lord, he was Xin Mo’s master. Does A-Yuan want to know the one thing *that* Luo Binghe didn’t possess?”

“I couldn’t imagine it,” Shen Yuan murmurs, because what in the world is there that Luo Binghe wants that he can’t have? Wasn’t Luo Binghe supposed to get everything he wants? All those wives, all those treasures, the triumph over his enemies, the revenge…

“Wives,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan stares in dumbfounded horror. In what world would Luo Binghe, *the* harem master, not have a *harem*!? What kind of failed world was that?! “In that world, the other Luo Binghe didn’t take a single woman as his wife. He didn’t have a harem. In fact, his heart only belonged to *one* person.”

Shen Yuan feels dizzy. There’s a version of Luo Binghe, the protagonist of a stallion novel, the harem master whose entire story was 90% wife plots, papapa, and sex pollen, that’s *monogamous*? Shen Yuan can't help but burst out laughing.

“That’s *ridiculous*,” he complains. Luo Binghe raises an eyebrow, his expression incredulous. “Absurd! Just one person?”

“A-Yuan isn’t curious about *who*?” Luo Binghe asks. He seems to be enjoying his storytelling very much, and Shen Yuan has no idea why.

“Ning Yingying?” Shen Yuan asks, a little curious. He hasn’t seen her in the Palace until now, but from what he’s heard, it seems she has special permission from Binghe to leave the underground palace on trips and explorations. Luo Binghe clicks his tongue, shaking his head. “Liu Mingyan?” he tries again.

Luo Binghe shakes his head again. “It’s not Sha Hualing either,” he mocks. Shen Yuan pouts.

“I hope it’s not Xiao Gongzhu,” he complains, wrinkling his nose. “She tried to attack me, and *I had* to defend myself. I’m sure she would have stabbed me if I didn’t have backup. Oh, oh, could you raise Zi-Zhao’s salary? She’s *incredible*.”

“Oh, she did that?” Luo Binghe’s expression darkens a bit. Shen Yuan feels a chill run through him. Well, sorry Binghe, it’s not like Shen Yuan meant to offend one of his wives, but! What did Binghe expect him to do? He was pulled with a whip!! His arm could have been torn off! “This Lord will take care of that issue.”

“Fool,” Shen Yuan complains. Still: “It’s not Xiao Gongzhu, is it?”

Luo Binghe laughs and shakes his head: “No, neither is it any of this Emperor’s other wives. In fact, A Yuan is quite far off track. If he continues that path, he will never guess.”

“Then tell me.” Shen Yuan laughs a little. Another coughing fit shakes him, and Luo Binghe rubs his back, handing him another cup of water. Shen Yuan relaxes a little more, a slow caress sliding through his hair. Everything spins a little, feeling lighter around him. More medicine taking effect? “Come on, hurry up. Before I fall asleep. I'm curious.”

Luo Binghe smiles. His smile is still there, an expression almost absurdly amused. His eyes curve into dark crescent moons, and Shen Yuan is so amazed at seeing him so strangely radiant that he almost misses it when Luo Binghe simply says:

“Shen Qingqiu.”

Shen Yuan lets out a horrified gasp.

“No fucking way!” he says. Luo Binghe nods, amused complicity written all over his face while Shen Yuan grimaces, all his relaxed sleepiness thrown out the window. Impossible!! No way!! Shen Qingqiu!? The Scum Villain Shen Qingqiu?! Luo Binghe, being monogamous *with Shen Qingqiu?* Shen Yuan can’t even decide which part is the most absurd!! “You’re messing with me.”

“This Lord wouldn’t dare,” Luo Binghe hums, gleeful and satisfied with Shen Yuan’s horror. But of course, how could he not be beyond horrified! It wasn’t even about homophobia, because of *course* anyone would want him, he’s Luo Binghe!! If a very straight man was going to fall head over heels for another, of course it would be for Luo Binghe! But Shen Qingqiu, the *scum villain*, the one to blame for all of Luo Binghe’s woes throughout his adolescence and growth!! Was that even a healthy relationship?! It couldn’t possibly be!!

“A-Yuan must imagine this Lord’s bewilderment upon arriving in that strange world. No wives, a kingdom with fewer territories, a mountain that he had already devastated and burned to ashes still standing… and being looked after by Shen Qingqiu with the kindness of a master to his adored disciple, and the softness of a devoted lover’s touch.”

“*No way*!” Luo Binghe burst out laughing as Shen Yuan continued to gesture. He was sure his entire face was burning with indignation. Kindness, devotion! That could never be Shen Qingqiu’s doing! What the hell?! “You big liar! You’re joking!”

“Absolutely not,” Luo Binghe insists. He licks his lips, the radiant smile on his face looking even wilder. “A-Yuan must believe this Lord.”

“I believe in you—,” Shen Yuan says, because after all, what would be the point of Luo Binghe lying to him about that? “But how…?”

Shen Yuan isn't sure what he wants to ask exactly. How did it end up like this? What would have made Luo Binghe, the stallion protagonist and harem master, replace all those peerless beauties with… with his Shizun? That scum villain, too! That old and nasty Immortal Master!! How did that even happen?! How was that even a functional relationship?!

Luo Binghe hums.

“Apparently, in that world, Shen Qingqiu suffered a horrendous qi deviation,” he says. His tone is gentle, simple, though his facial expression seems to be telling him something else. Shen Yuan feels a little dizzy, trying to understand what exactly he’s trying to tell him. “After that, his personality changed *completely.* Rumor had it that the qi deviation erased the painful memories of his past, easing the demons in his heart that made him cruel and irascible,” Luo Binghe says. Shen Yuan is sure this is the stupidest explanation he’s ever heard, even if it’s the one that makes the most sense in terms of a xianxia understanding of mental health. “Shen Qingqiu took the Luo Binghe of his world under his wing, like a kind Shizun. He nurtured him, trained him, *spoiled him.* And then he pushed him into the Endless Abyss.”

“What?!” Shen Yuan stares at him with a horrified expression. Raising his voice burns in his throat, and he coughs again. “Why the hell would he do that?!”

“Because of this one’s revealed heritage?” Luo Binghe tapped his finger on his forehead, the red zuiyin showing. Shen Yuan felt his mouth go slightly dry from the irritation in his throat at the sight. “No matter what world, it seems, Luo Binghe will always have the blood of a Heavenly Demon. And his Shizun, no matter how kind he is, will reject him for it.”

“But you're telling me that after *all that*, they ended up together!” Shen Yuan complains, completely confused. Hadn’t that Luo Binghe wanted revenge on the Scum Villain!? Hadn’t he returned after five years in hell with his heart full of hatred and a desire for revenge? “Did that Luo Binghe forgive Shen Qingqiu *for that*?”

Luo Binghe hums in agreement. “It seems that Luo Binghe’s devotion and love for his Shizun was greater than the pain he suffered from being discarded like that.”

Shen Yuan feels the pain in his head— a subtle, throbbing thing of his fever— growing. He can't *understand.* Why...? Why *everything?* Luo Binghe being monogamous and devoted. Luo Binghe with Shen Qingqiu. Luo Binghe *with a man.* Luo Binghe sparing the scum villain's life... *for love*? He's absolutely giddy with outrage. Oh, if this were a novel, of course Peerless Cucumber would unleash all his hatred about that ridiculous plot! What is supposed to be up with that shit?! Toxic yaoi with an age gap and amnesia? That's the kind of plot a young teen girl with unsupervised internet access would read!! Shen Yuan isn't sure he can even take something like that seriously!

“It doesn’t make sense,” Shen Yuan complains. Luo Binghe laughs.

“This Lord thinks the same,” he hums. Shen Yuan sighs. The itch in his throat is enough to make him dizzy, wanting to cough, but it’s much better than before. Is the medicine already taking effect? Or is it just good hydration? “After all, Shen Qingqiu *had* been the one who had pushed Luo Binghe into the Endless Abyss, and the one who had humiliated and tortured him during his early years at Qing Jing Peak. Was the qi deviation something that changed him *enough* that a couple of years of caring for a disciple he had previously tortured and humiliated was enough to forgive such a great betrayal? Had the thing that had caused the qi deviation been something so significant, so heartbreaking, that it had altered Shen Qingqiu *so much* that those early years were forgivable to that Luo Binghe, after emerging from the Endless Abyss?”

Shen Yuan can't imagine it. Luo Binghe's expression doesn't seem to be asking him truly expectant of the answer, more as if he's lost in unanswerable thoughts that have been wandering for a long time. Shen Yuan doesn't understand either. Then Luo Binghe has that strange smile on his face, a look that seems almost provocative and somewhat mocking, and Shen Yuan suddenly sees how the parts of the conversation fit into place like two precise, perfectly cut puzzle pieces.

“It was—,” he says, choked on his own breath. Judging by Luo Binghe’s wide smile, he seems to have come to the same conclusion. “That Shen Qingqiu was a *transmigrator*, wasn't he?”

Luo Binghe hums. He seems to be gloating a little. “This Lord wasn’t certain. He knew, of course, that the soul of that kind-handed, warm-voiced Shizun was *different* from the soul of the Shen Qingqiu this Emperor had once known. Upon returning to his own world, this Lord

confirmed this," and from the tone of his voice, Shen Yuan is quite certain that he doesn't want to even try to guess what Luo Binghe might have done to be so certain. "But this one didn't *understand*. How had it happened, and *why*? What could have possessed the body of a Peak Lord from a sect as important as Cang Qiong and not arouse suspicion? He possessed vast knowledge of the world, enough to play the role of a Peak Lord with all his knowledge and wisdom. No exorcism had worked, and even Hong Jing had proved unresponsive…"

"Of course not." Shen Yuan feels the pieces of that strange world fit together a little better now. It's easier to see it from that perspective. "If he was a transmigrator, they do sometimes have a kind of protagonist halo behind them? Whether or not they were the protagonists of the original story, it would be horrendous if he were found out right away!" Luo Binghe has a playful smile on his face, his expression jovial as Shen Yuan chokes every now and then with his sore throat, trying to speak excitedly. "Oh! What if he had a System, and that's why, despite treating that Luo Binghe well during his time in Qing Jing, he had to push him into the Abyss? I mean, in those kinds of stories, some narratively important things are bound to happen."

Luo Binghe hums in agreement. "That is an explanation this Lord appreciates. If that Shen Qingqiu was forced by a higher power to do that deed, the sin of his mistakes is even easier to atone for."

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Transmigrator or not, forgiving Shen Qingqiu for his misdeeds isn't something he's planning to do anytime soon.

"Shen Qingqiu," Shen Yuan complains, wrinkling his nose. Luo Binghe laughs, as if his irritated tone is the funniest thing in the world. "How awful. A Luo Binghe *with* Shen Qingqiu? I wouldn't read that fanfic."

He's not going to explain what fan fiction is to Luo Binghe, but he doesn't seem to ask, a little more distracted by making sure that Shen Yuan has fresh water to drink again and a soft pillow to settle into. He figures that with the fever he's running, it's best to hydrate himself. Luo Binghe checks his face again, and it seems to be much better, because the smile that forms on his face seems to reach his eyes.

"A-Yuan should rest," Luo Binghe hums. A cool towel is placed over his forehead, almost covering his eyes. The towel is soft and modern. "A little more rest while his medication takes effect, and he'll be better. That's what Mu Qingfang said."

Shen Yuan is quite happy with the idea of rest. The pillow is firm but soft, and Shen Yuan settles in, allowing himself to be lulled into relaxing. He's not sure if he's fallen asleep or not, with that feverish back-and-forth of not having a precise idea of whether it's been five minutes or an hour, but he finds himself laughing a little dazedly.

"What is A-Yuan thinking about?" Luo Binghe asks, and Shen Yuan guesses that he hasn't exactly fallen asleep if Luo Binghe is expecting an answer from him. Shen Yuan struggles with the words in a daze before saying,

"*You married Shen Qingqiu? And got busy*" he says, still with his eyes closed and heavy-lidded, with that ridiculous tone of Syndrome from "The Incredibles". They've only seen the

movie about twice, since even though it's funny, Chengle hasn't yet developed a taste for superheroes, so it's a surprise when Luo Binghe bursts out laughing, understanding the joke. He supposes it's a positive thing that he actually pays attention to the movies they watch with Chengle. "Should it be weird that I'm more surprised that it's Shen Qingqiu than that it's a man? I mean, *you don't* like men," he mumbles.

He waits for Luo Binghe to keep laughing. When he doesn't, Shen Yuan opens his eyes, curious.

Luo Binghe has a raised eyebrow and a puzzled expression on his face. Shen Yuan knows he's feverish, but… but it's absolutely *ridiculous.* That expression! As if Shen Yuan was saying something so stupid! Even if that other Luo Binghe from that weird world had given up his harem for his Scum Shizun, that didn't immediately make *any other* Luo Binghe gay!!

Or…? No, *no*, that *couldn't* be. This Luo Binghe had so many wives, and enough children, that it was clear he had no problem doing all the papapa-process with all the wives he wanted! The Protagonist couldn't be... Luo Binghe *couldn't be...*

"A-Yuan," Luo Binghe said, his expression almost worried. His brow furrowed in the most adorable way, his tense expression raising goosebumps. "Hasn't this Lord made himself clear enough?"

Shen Yuan doesn't even think about what Luo Binghe is talking about. He doesn't know if it's because his head won't grasp it, because he himself feels too numb, if it's the fever, or if it's his simple inability to play guessing games when it comes to Luo Binghe, but any further thoughts or reactions are abruptly cut off when, without even a moment's hesitation, Luo Binghe leans in, pulling his face at an awkward angle that tugs almost painfully at his neck.

But the pain doesn't even matter, because Luo Binghe kisses him. *Again.*

There's no excuse that can make sense in his feverish brain; he can't blame it on delusions, his fever, pity, Xin Mo, anything. Luo Binghe had looked at him with frustrated eyes, a determined expression burning in those black deep eyes just before he began to kiss him. And oh, God, *the way in that he kisses him.* His lips are so soft, an insistent brush against his mouth that he hardly seems to care how dry his lips are. Luo Binghe pulls away for a single breath—then his mouth is on him again, devouring him alive.

It's so utterly ridiculous that, as feverish and sick as he feels— his body is weak and his mind a dizzy, muddled mess— *this* is when Shen Yuan feels most ridiculously sane. Luo Binghe kisses him as if he wants to kiss him, *willingly doing so,* like he's found a home in his mouth, and Shen Yuan can't, he *can't* believe that beneath the touch of his lips he can feel this good.

Luo Binghe *wants* to kiss him. Because Luo Binghe *likes Shen Yuan.* Doesn't he? He... isn't that what he's been telling him? It's like putting on new glasses with a different, appropriate prescription, and suddenly not just those kisses, but *absolutely all* the tiny, minute details that made up Luo Binghe's warm, caring treatment of him make sense to him in a way he wouldn't have understood under any other circumstances.

Because yes, all that could be wife-hunting! But Shen Yuan isn't a woman. *But Luo Binghe likes Shen Yuan.* And he's kissing him, his thumb caressing his face as he holds him tightly in his arms. Shen Yuan can't help but sigh into that kiss, his heart racing in his chest, thrumming against his throat, the fevered mess that he is trembling. Or maybe not trembling from the fever, but from the way every moment of the last few long, long weeks is crumbling and rearranging in his head, battering him with the force of a storm.

Luo Binghe… he…

Shen Yuan isn't sure exactly where his mind is going other than panic, interrupted by a hostile and incredibly familiar voice saying, "Oh, motherfucker. If that bastard gets sick, I *refuse* to look after both of you. Fuck off."

Shen Yuan scoots away from Luo Binghe with a shriek that sounds shrill to his own ears. Luo Binghe lets him get away, but not too far – not that he'll be able to fall off the fucking huge bed! A fucking huge bed he's cuddled up in Luo Binghe's arms on, surrounded by cloud-like soft pillows!

A fucking huge bed he just got *caught* making out with Luo Binghe on!

… Shen Yuan makes eye contact with Jiu-ge for a long, *long* second, not understanding whether he's actually hallucinating because *he's there.* Jiu-ge is wearing his office clothes, with a weary expression and his arms crossed over his chest.

Maybe Shen Yuan is at least a little crazy.

"Jiu-ge?" he asks, with another shrill croak. How…? *What the hell*? "What…?"

Jiu-ge rolls his eyes. He gives Luo Binghe a look that's practically murderous and Luo Binghe sighs and pulls away, reluctantly getting out of bed as Jiu-ge approaches. In the huge antique room, Jiu-ge is totally out of place; sharp angles, square glasses, formal suit, approaching the bed. He smacks Luo Binghe with an unnecessary swat to get him out of his way that is probably more painful for Jiu-ge than for Luo Binghe as he reaches over to check Shen Yuan's temperature with the back of his hand.

"Who the hell do you think would know what meds to give you? You idiot," Jiu-ge hisses, clearly enraged. Shen Yuan isn't sure the last time he's seen him like this. "*I knew* something was up, of course. That idiot friend of yours wouldn't answer a single one of my calls and kept pretending to be you in texts. Like I couldn't recognize you even from your stupid texts."

Jiu-ge behaves as if it were just another call from Shen Yuan to help him at his apartment when he'd inevitably fall ill with something. He hands him a cup of water (seriously, at this point Shen Yuan doesn't want any more water. He's pretty sure he's drunk over a liter in a very short time), and only when he's finished wiping his face with the cool towel does he take a real thermometer out of his pocket and shove it into his mouth.

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

"Were you in the apartment?" he asks, signing in the air. The movement stings painfully against his wrist. Jiu-ge nods, thankfully not noticing.

"That idiot friend of yours kept insisting that you were just out for a walk while trying to hide the fact that his huge boyfriend was there. As if I couldn't see those ugly boots by the door," Jiu-ge sneers, now glancing at Luo Binghe's boots as if they were the ugliest thing he's ever seen. Shen Yuan feels like he's on the verge of hysteria. "Imagine how surprised I was when a huge *thing* opened up in the middle of your apartment and this jerk showed up looking for medicine. Are you telling me it *didn't occur to you* to bring a fucking emergency kit with you to another *plane of reality,* you dumbass? Is your brain just for show or you plan to use it sometimes?"

"I brought my medication," Shen Yuan signs on air. When the thermometer beeps, he continues speaking normally while Jiu-ge retrieves it to check his actual temperature. "We weren't going to stay more than three or four days at the most. And I brought emergency medication just in case."

"Of course, without telling your stupid boyfriend from *another world* what they were," Jiu-ge continues to scold. Shen Yuan grimaces. If he discounted the boyfriend part, Shen Jiu was right. "Do you realize how much of an idiot you are right now? You're so stupid. I'd hit you if you were healthier."

"I didn't think this would happen," he complains. Shen Yuan slumps back against the pillow. He's feeling dizzy again, his headache growing increasingly severe. "My health was *fine.* I wasn't overexerting myself, or…"

Shen Jiu's look silences him before he can finish speaking. Jiu-ge shows the thermometer to Luo Binghe.

"His fever is still high," he says, completely ignoring Shen Yuan. "Have some of your servants prepare a bathtub of warm water. Where's that doctor? He said he'd be back with more tinctures over an hour ago and still *nothing*. Is that man that cowardly, or is he just afraid of authority? I didn't even say five words to him before he ran away. What the hell is wrong with him? Doesn't he understand the concept of a fucking medical emergency? God, seriously, can anyone in this fucking palace get *some ice*?"

As if still in his office, not even caring about the puzzled look Luo Binghe is giving him, Jiu-ge leaves, closing the door with a slam that shouldn't have made the doorframe rattle the way it does. Shen Yuan falls silent, sharing a glance with Luo Binghe, feeling like his brain is melting through his ears.

"I don't like your brother," Luo Binghe says finally. He wrinkles his nose, and Shen Yuan feels high at the thought of him being so adorable.

Frantic, hysterical, Shen Yuan can only reply: "I would be worried if you did." Luo Binghe's laughter is more hysterical than amused.

Shen Yuan feels exactly the same.

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A lukewarm bath later, clean clothes that are still robes because given the number of servants coming in and out carrying things Luo Binghe is excessively nervous to leave him in just his pajamas, and some horrible tea from a pale, and strangely on the verge of a nervous breakdown, Mu Qingfang (…has Luo Binghe been rude to him? Right now, Shen Yuan can't deal with it, but if he finds out that Luo Binghe threatened him somehow…), Jiu-ge takes his temperature again and he's no longer such a pain in the ass anymore since it's low enough for him to stop treating Shen Yuan like he'll die if he looks away.

“I don’t understand why you dared to try to hide this from me,” Jiu-ge says, gesturing disdainfully around the room.

“What, would you have believed me?” Shen Yuan asks. Luo Binghe has left them alone to go find Chengle. Shen Yuan is dying to see and hug him, assuring him that everything will be okay. His poor boy must have been terrified.

“No,” Jiu-ge says simply. “I would have called you crazy the first three times. Then I would have thought you were on drugs. Maybe by the fifth or sixth time I would have started to get curious.”

Shen Yuan sighs. Despite everything, he can't help but smile.

“Well, this is the reality,” he points to the room. “Chengle showed up in my apartment one day. I have no idea how or why he got there, but…” And thinking back, as always, brings back that same feeling of sadness. His poor little boy had been so hurt, so scared. It almost feels as if, compared to the warm, gentle days he now lives in, the memories are clouded with the blue tint of his little one’s sadness. “Well. You know the rest.”

“Yes,” Jiu-ge says. His gaze looks strangely distant. “I know.”

The silence feels strangely heavy. Despite everything, Shen Yuan knows Jiu-ge *isn't* upset. Irritated, of course. Angry at Shen Yuan for being an idiot, which is perfectly fine. But… something feels tight around the edges, as if Shen Jiu has something to say that he's holding there, rocking in the silence.

Whatever it is, he doesn't say. He simply says, "That answers some questions."

“Like ‘How did you get a child illegally from nowhere?’” Shen Yuan asks. Jiu-ge rolls his eyes.

“Besides that,” he snorts, a sullen laugh. Then his expression darkens. “You’re *not* staying here.”

“Obviously not,” Shen Yuan replies immediately. The tension in Shen Jiu's shoulders loosens just a little. “Do you think I’m *that* crazy? His wives would skin me.”

It's probably not the kind of thing he should say to reassure Jiu-ge, because where his countenance was gloomy, it now worsens. His tense expression transforms into horror,

staring at Shen Yuan with such a charged expression that even Shen Yuan feels sick about it.

“Does he have *wives*?” he hisses, his voice horrified. “That fucking asshole dared to *get involved with* you while he was *married*?”

“Hey,” Shen Yuan raises his hand, which *isn’t* the right decision either, because his new robes have much shorter sleeves and slide down onto the bandage Mu Qingfang replaced on his clearly still swollen wrist. Shen Jiu’s face pales. “I know it sounds *bad.* But he doesn’t… We don’t…”

“I’m not blind or stupid, who the hell do you take me for?” Jiu-ge growls. “I saw-…”

“I know what you saw!” and Shen Yuan feels his throat burn as he raises his voice. “I know! But he—! We *don’t*!” His face burns. His ears burn. His chest burns. His eyes burn so much he feels like he’s about to cry even though he has no idea why. He takes a deep breath, dizzy, and Jiu-ge moves with almost robotic movements to hand him more water. “I’m not going to discuss this with you. Control my health all you want, but I *don’t* have to explain my life or my decisions to you.”

…especially since Shen Yuan doesn't even have any logical explanations or answers for himself. Luo Binghe kissed him for the third time an hour ago, and only for the first time could Shen Yuan confront the fact that Luo Binghe was kissing him *willingly*, for the pleasure of it, because he…

Shen Yuan isn't sure where that leaves the two of them. He doesn't even want to consider Chengle's obvious and utter rejection of the matter because he doesn't even know if there's a *matter* to consider. Of course, Shen Yuan *isn't gay.* He... he'd know if he was gay! Wouldn't he? He would like *guys*. Sure, it's not like Shen Yuan had any girlfriends or girls who drove him crazy during school, and his only other experience kissing a girl had been... awkward and strange. Good, but not entirely enjoyable. Just doing something because it felt strange that as teenagers, neither of them had kissed anyone yet.

But kissing Luo Binghe had been… pleasant. It was impossible not to find the touch of his mouth pleasant, or the care infused with his hands, or the way his eyes curved into that tender crescent when he smiled. Was it… possible? Was it possible that *he liked* Luo Binghe?

Shen Yuan is in no mental, emotional, or physical position to deal *with any of that.*

Shen Jiu grimaces. Thankfully, he doesn't say anything, nor does he persist. Shen Yuan is grateful for this, simply because he doesn't feel like bursting into tears over not knowing how to get his brother to shut the hell up.

“Do what you want,” he hisses at the end. “But if you get hurt from this, I don't care if it was you stupid, willful decision, *I'm going* to kill him.”

“I don’t think you’re capable,” Shen Yuan mutters. Shen Jiu’s shoulders shake as he laughs. “Oh, don’t try me.”

Shen Yuan doesn't even get to imagine what kind of scenarios Shen Jiu is considering, because at that moment the door opens, and his little boy sprints through it like a fired rocket towards the bed.

“Baba! Baba!” Chengle leaps up, jumping with such force that Shen Yuan is grateful for so many pillows to cushion the impact. His boy burrows into his embrace, tight and warm. “Is Baba okay? Does Baba have to go back to the hospital? Was Doctor Mu able to heal you?”

“It’s just a throat infection,” Shen Jiu says, patting Chengle on the head. “Your silly Baba has hurt and overexerted himself these past few days. His immune system has dropped much more than is healthy, and now he is sick. But I already brought him antibiotics, and as long as his fever isn’t uncontrollable, he won’t have to go back to the hospital. *Although* it would be relieving if we stopped by the hospital on the way back, to rule anything out.”

“I didn’t know you were also a medical doctor,” Shen Yuan complains. Shen Jiu tugs at his ear.

“I’m not a babysitter either, but these are things you learn along the way when you need them,” he grumbles. Shen Yuan supposes he must agree with him somewhat.

Chengle's eyes are watery, but he's not crying. His baby boy is sweet, brave, and needs a good dose of tight hugs, kisses sprinkled on his face, and Shen Yuan's pinky promise that he'll get much better and be healthy and strong soon so that his sweet boy's mood will start to improve.

Luo Binghe enters a little later. Shen Yuan smiles when he sees that he is carrying Shaoyu, who is nibbling on the sleeve guard on his wrist.

“How many of *those* do you have?” Shen Jiu asks, his gaze clearly contemptuous of Luo Binghe. Then his gaze softens as he looks at the little girl clinging to his arm. “Hello, little girl. Did you hunt that big beast?”

“Jiu-ge, *no,*” Shen Yuan tries to warn, absolutely too late, because Shaoshao has the widest smile on her little face.

“Big Beast!” she squeals. Luo Binghe looks at Jiu-ge with a horrified expression while his little girl claps, completely happy and pleased. “Shaoshao hunt Big Beast!”

Luo Binghe has the kind of expression of someone planning a murder. Shen Yuan looks at him, apologetic with his eyes, and pinches Chengle's cheeks a little to make it less obvious how much his son is laughing at his father's expense.

“A-Shao is a good hunter,” Luo Binghe says, brushing one of the girl’s unruly strands away from her face. His expression turns mischievous and not *so* hostile a moment later, as he says, “Doesn’t little A-Shao want to hunt a human and make her mother proud with a great hunt?”

“Binghe, *no*” Shen Yuan warns, absolutely in vain because as soon as Luo Binghe puts Shaoyu down, not even half a second later the girl runs like a wrecking ball straight at Jiu-ge's legs.

“*Shit*!” Shen Jiu shouts, as the girl bites him under the knee.

“Shit!” Shaoshao repeats, bursting into laughter. “Shaoshao caught Human-Shit! Shaoshao’s the best!”

Shen Yuan looks at Chengle with the best long-suffering expression he can.

“I give up,” he says, and Chengle laughs. Shen Yuan holds his little face in his hands, so happy to see him that the pain of his poor health isn’t even a big deal right now. “Let’s let Shaoshao hunt them and present them as offerings to your Lingling. Maybe she’ll cook them for dinner. In the meantime, it’s just you and me, so you can tell me how your day went. What do you think?” Chengle has the most radiant smile in the world. He snuggles up in his arms.

“An-ge and I explored Doctor Mu’s library,” says his kid, swept up in excitement. “And we saw big books and drawings of human parts. The insides! It’s *disgusting*!” his boy wrinkles his nose. “An-ge said he wants to learn some medicine. That way I won’t be sad when Baba gets really sick, and he can be help. I want to learn, too! A little. But I don’t want to see the inside of humans,” and he wrinkles his face again. “They’re really gross. It’s like raw meat! Eww!”

Shen Yuan ignores anything other than his little boy for as long as he can. While his sweet son tells him how he spent his half of that day, during which Shen Yuan was more feverish than coherent, more carried away by stories and revelations. His little boy had been strong and brave, and now Shen Yuan is going to give him all the attention his little boy deserves.

Even if he feels a little guilty—like Chengle might hate him, likeShen Yuan might lose his love and affection because of the things he *thinks* he feels—he ignores the guilt and feelings as best he can. When in some future he’s firm in his certainty, when he really knows what he *feels*, what he *wants*, and what he’ll *do*, when his thoughts and feelings are in order… only *then* will Shen Yuan talk to Chengle about it.

In the meanwhile, Shen Yuan doesn't think it's worth the trouble. His poor child has too many worries about his Baba's poor health right now to burden him with any more troubles or anguish.

Chapter End Notes

SY: Oh, I thought I transmigrated. Ah?? Ah, yeah, transmigrating is what happens when you die and your soul transfers to a body that isn't yours
LBH: ...oh. OH
LBH: I think I just developed a new kind of PARANOIA

SY: You're obviously not gay, duh
LBH: *stares at the camera like in The Office*

SJ, at the palace: After all these years, I would return to the scene of my greatest defeat
SJ: *hugging Chengle and on the verge of a hysterical fit* As a tourist :)
(YOU KNOW THAT SCENE WAS PLANNED SINCE SEPTEMBER 8TH? I LITERALLY POSTED THAT MEME ON TUMBLR WHEN I THOUGHTED IT, HEHEHEH)

...I wanted to use the "you married elastigirl and got busy" meme from the Shen Yuan Transmigration System fic. In fact, I think I used it in some author's notes about it. ANYWAY, WHO SAYS I CAN'T RECYCLE MY JOKES? I STILL FIND IT REALLY FUNNY, OK?

I told you this chapter took place 95% in bed :P
I don't know if my memory is failing me, but I don't think in many post-bingge vs. bingmei extra bingyuan fics I've read, there's ever been a circumstance where bingyuan talks about what bingge saw in that world. Or where bingge has some kind of 'confirmation' or something about what might have actually happened, even if he can assume/suspect/have the idea that Kind Shizun isn't the same SQQ he knows and hates. Anyway. This chapter was completely self-indulgent because I love having Bingyuan do this weird thing called COMMUNICATING. Even if it's with SY in a fever high enough that he can't escape direct communication XD

GUYS. GUYS. IS THAT A SHEN YUAN PEEKING OUT OF THE CLOSET??? IS THAT REALLY WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE?? WOW. YES. PLEASE DON'T SHOUT TOO MUCH, YOU MIGHT SCARE HIM. HE'S A SLIPPERY SPECIES!!!!!

Mu Qingfang is having a nervous breakdown, and oh, poor Shen Jiu, he's more on the verge of a hysterical fit than usual. Why is that? /j

HAHAHAHA THIS CHAPTER WAS SO. I DON'T KNOW. FUN TO WRITE. I love the silly chapters where, after all the drama and chaos, I give the characters a little bit of comfort. They deserve it. They've fought so hard to get here. Especially Shen Yuan. How about seeing something besides the walls of your closet, silly boy? :P
MWAH EVERYONE, THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING!! I HOPE YOU ENJOYED THE CHAPTER :D YOU KNOW, YOU KNOW, KUDO-COMMENT-INTERACTION, BIG HUGS FOR YOU!!!!
SEE YOU SOON!! :D

Chapter 33: Second time seeing all the wrongs

Chapter Notes

WOW, THIS HAS BEEN THE LONGEST TIME I'VE GONE WITHOUT UPDATING THIS FIC..... Sorry, I update periodically because this fic is my mental health right now, but this last week I had to switch to eye drops to prepare my eyes for an operation I'll have the first week of november :P I'll be fine, the typical recovery time of a few days, but the effects of the drops have made my life a little bit of a mess these days (I've written the same, just with my eyes closed and based 100% on my muscle memory between fingers and keyboard. I don't recommend it)
ANYWAY. I MISSED YOU ALL. BIG SMOOCH TO EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU

AND WE HAVE FANART!!! YOU CAN SEE IT HERE AND HERE!!! Have I told you how incredibly grateful I am every time you do anything inspired by this story? I'm CRYING on the FLOOR. I get emotional like you wouldn't believe. Someday I'll print them all out and put them on my wall. Thank you so much

Anyways—
Chapter warnings: Shen Yuan™, Xiao Gongzhu™, Shen Jiu™, mentions of abortions (no abortion happens) and postpartum depression, indirect and direct child neglect

Enjoy the chapter! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You humans are *so* fragile,” Sha Hualing complains when she comes in sometime in the afternoon. Shen Yuan is bored out of his mind, with a fever that rises and falls, and a child who has gone off to play when even the tightest hugs and the relief of seeing Shen Yuan safe couldn’t combat his restless legs. Shen Yuan had urged him to do it, after all. His time with his An-ge wasn’t going to last long! His child must make the most of every moment.

Shen Yuan looks at Sha Hualing and sighs: “Well, not all of us have blood that can turn into poison if it comes into contact with silver like the Sha Clan.”

Sha Hualing stops and looks at him. Her smile spreads widely.

“Well, well!” she scampered up onto the bed. Her smile was so wide it showed all her teeth, even the sharp, shiny ones. It should be menacing, but Shen Yuan didn’t think the woman would be capable of more than nibbling at his elbow a little. “How do you know these little secrets, huh, you rascal?”

Shen Yuan shrugs. It hurts less, though it's still painful.

“I have my ways,” he says, because telling her that he found out when she used her own blood poured into a silver cup to falsely swear loyalty to an enemy Lord who dared to attack the harem when Luo Binghe wasn’t around isn’t an option. Much less when it reminds him of the ugly papapa scenario that followed. At least some hygiene and corpse removal, really! “Though I always wondered if it worked the other way around. So, is silver something that activates the poison in the Sha Clan demons’ blood even *inside of you*? Would you be more likely to be seriously injured if your opponent uses silver weapons? Is the contact of silver with your blood more painful than with other weapons?”

Sha Hualing sits casually cross-legged on the bed. She thoughtfully taps her chin with her long, sharp fingernail.

“I’ve never poisoned myself by wearing earrings,” she notes, fiddling with the long silver ones with her other hand. “I haven’t noticed silver weapons hurt more either,” she shrugs. And then, inevitably, with a wide, radiant smile: “Wanna try?”

“*No*,” Shen Yuan says quickly. Sha Hualing pouts. “…not for now,” he mutters, and Sha Hualing gives a small, chirpy laugh. Not that he has much interest in, er, *hurting* Sha Hualing? But she offered it anyway, and it’s not like a little scratch to test if it makes a difference can do much harm…

“Clever boy,” Sha Hualing approves. Then, she sighs and steals one of the pillows from him, kneading it in her hands like a lazy cat. Her entire verbal language is relaxed, so it comes as a surprise to Shen Yuan when she speaks in a firm voice. “You’re nice *and* clever. I thought you’d be another foolish human that Junshang brings when he’s bored, only from far away this time.” She wrinkles her nose. Then, she sighs. “This Lingling will never repay you for the help you’ve been providing Mingyan.”

“There’s no debt,” Shen Yuan is quick to clarify. He coughs, and Sha Hualing doesn’t offer him water, but she does look as if she’d be ready to fight if anything were to come out of Shen Yuan’s mouth. Nothing, thankfully. “Mingyan is… Chengle’s mother. And I love him, and *she* loves him. Chengle deserves to be with those who love him and make him happy, and she deserves that happiness. If anything in my world can help her, why not?”

Sha Hualing doesn't reply. She stares at her nails, seeming almost disinterested, except for the small crease forming in her frown, which clearly shows that not everything about her is as relaxed as it visibly appears.

And finally: “You have to take her with you.”

“Pardon?” Shen Yuan chokes out another cough. Sha Hualing’s expression is exasperated.

“Mingyan,” she says, as if Shen Yuan were an idiot. “She’ll *never* get better here. Your world has things that can do her good. Why don’t you just take her with you and make her well? Are you selfish enough to hog those miracle cures for yourself? It’s not like they’ll work for *you*.” And Sha Hualing seems to have bared her claws. It’s not as if anything offends or hurts, but this is the closest he’s ever been to the sadistic demon, and Shen Yuan can’t even bring himself to feel afraid of it. “Your world will take better care of her.”

“I couldn’t,” Shen Yuan says. Sha Hualing grimaces, clearly ready to fight, but Shen Yuan holds up a hand, stopping her. “I’m not saying that Liu Mingyan isn’t welcome whenever she wants to come, or that I won’t continue to find ways to get her help, but I can’t just *take her* with me. I don’t have a large space where she’ll be comfortable, and honestly,” Shen Yuan points to himself with a vague sense of chill, “I can barely take care of *myself* and Chengle. If Mingyan comes, she’ll bring Chenxue, and *I can’t, and I don’t* have enough space for all of them. I’m not saying that I *won’t* help in any way I can, but… I really *can’t.* Not now.”

And he doesn't even want to imagine how Chengle would react. It's not that he doesn't care about Mingyan or her daughter, it's just... *well*. Shen Yuan has to prioritize Chengle, and while it would certainly be good for him to spend more time with his mother, it's clear that she's not yet settled enough to truly *be* a constant companion for Chengle. And that his little, weepy boy still has a long way to go before he can accept his baby sister into his life.

Sha Hualing presses her lips into a thin line. She doesn't seem at all satisfied about this. She seems to think for a long moment about exactly what to say, her expression clearly annoyed, before saying in a much lower tone than before:

“Mingyan wasn’t sure she wanted another child,” she says. Shen Yuan tries not to react in any way, which he supposes is a way to react, because Sha Hualing still grimaces. Nothing feels right to say or react in a situation like this. “Mingyan loves Chengle, *of course*, it’s her baby. And she loves Chenxue… *now,* ” and her mouth curls into a snarl rather than a smile. “This Lingling offered that she could help Mingyan to interrupt the pregnancy if she wanted, but Mingyan went ahead with it. She *wasn’t* happy at all, though. *Humans*. They really are so fragile,” and Sha Hualing snorts. She looks like an annoyed cat.

“That must have been a… difficult situation,” Shen Yuan murmurs, when it’s clear that Sha Hualing won’t say anything else unless he speaks. She shrugs.

“Eternal-Heat Lily. Only Junshang could cure Mingyan,” she says, her voice flat. Her gaze isn’t hostile, but she looks somewhat lost. Shen Yuan has no idea how to offer her any comfort, or if she even needs any. “The pregnancy came as a surprise. Mingyan never wanted her child to have a sibling he might lose; during the pregnancy, she was *so* worried about it *all the time*, it was a headache for everyone. Did you know Mingyan had a brother? A brother who died.” And now, her mouth curls into a sadistic and certainly sad smile. “That bastard Shen Qingqiu *killed him.* And got away with it for years without retribution. Ah, but Junshang avenged his death *in spades.”*

With a uncomfortable shudder, Shen Yuan replies: “I’m… familiar with that.”

“Did Junshang tell you?” Sha Hualing turns to stare at him. Her eyes glow with a curiosity that almost burns. “How weird. This Lingling thought he didn’t tell such things to his fragile-souled humans.”

“Hey, my body is more fragile than I am,” Shen Yuan complains, which seems to be an appropriate thing to say, because Sha Hualing smiles a little more genuinely. “Binghe didn’t… didn’t tell me,” he says finally. “In my world, Luo Binghe’s story, his actions and certain… circumstances” and he makes a gesture that he hopes isn’t as embarrassing as he thinks “are… common knowledge. For anyone who’s curious.”

… he's not too confident in explaining the whole harem web novel thing, and he doesn't think Sha Hualing would be flattered in any way either. None of the wives would be flattered, and if he didn't explicitly explain it to Luo Binghe, it was precisely for those reasons!!

“That’s interesting,” Sha Hualing hums. Then, with an expression a little unreadable by Shen Yuan’s standards, she says, “You look almost like him. Well, when you’re angry, like when you were scolding that brat of Xiao Gongzhu. Your brother is his spitting image behind those crystals on his face.” Now she’s grimacing in disgust. “Don’t let Mingyan see him.”

“Oh,” and Shen Yuan has no idea what to say other than, “Okay? We won’t be staying long.”

Sha Hualing doesn't stay long too. She leaves after giving Shen Yuan one of the tinctures Mu Qingfang apparently instructed her to give him, and Shen Yuan takes it with a grimace of disgust, but it's what finally relieves the fierce sore throat that still lingers in him. He barely coughs afterward.

By early afternoon, he has already taken another short nap and wakes up when Luo Binghe brings him tea and snacks.

“How is A-Yuan feeling?” he asks. He feels the fever on his face and seems very pleased to find his face no longer so hot. “This one brought you something to snack on.”

The snacks turn out to be a shameless amount of soft wontons, with a tender, light filling. Shen Yuan endures Luo Binghe giving him only three with his own hand before he can't stand the embarrassment and demands the chopsticks. He survives four before the fifth falls off and Luo Binghe insists on continuing to feed him.

“I was thinking,” Shen Yuan says, looking at his hands. It’s *true*. Sadly, being on the recovery scale means he doesn’t have enough fever to be delirious, but it’s bad enough that he can’t risk getting out of bed. The space with his own mind, after having been avoiding it, is… rather unwelcome. “Can I ask you a question that might seem odd to you?”

Luo Binghe raises an eyebrow. His expression remains gentle.

“A-Yuan can ask whatever he wants,” he says. Even so, he feeds him with a wonton before Shen Yuan has a chance to speak. “Has the palace, the arrangement of the harem or servants given A-Yuan any questions? This Lord has no problem answering *any*, no matter what it is.”

Shen Yuan takes a sip of tea and clears his throat before daring to ask a question that even he finds pathetic:

“Is there… anything that makes you happy?”

Luo Binghe's expression seems to change for a moment. Shen Yuan looks away, embarrassed.

“Without context, the question sounds stupid,” he says, rushing through his words. “I mean, uh. Context. Remember I’m seeing this therapist?” he asks. And Luo Binghe hums in understanding, so Shen Yuan clears his throat again. “Well. *Well*. Uh, he kind of left me to think about it. If there’s anything that makes me *happy. Only* me, alone. And I mean, that’s

ridiculous, Chengle makes me happy, and it's not like I need *just* my own company to be happy. Aren't we humans social beings who need society to keep us stable? I mean…" And Shen Yuan takes a deep breath, daring to look at Luo Binghe. His expression seems to have composed itself a little. "My therapist asked me if there was anything that would make *me* happy, just *me*, that wasn't involved with anyone. I'm supposed to think about it and make a list of things or something, but isn't it kind of silly to think that…?"

"Yes, there is," and when he looks at Luo Binghe, his expression is almost apologetic. "I… I like cooking," Luo Binghe says, with a simplicity that hits him like a storm might. Shen Yuan doesn't know what expression he has on his face, but it's probably just enough for Luo Binghe to rush to explain: "When I cook, I *really* am happy. Even if I do it alone, and in fact, even more so when I can do it alone. I feel a little more like…" and he seems to hesitate a little, before exhaling: "Like nothing is that important. Like the greatest responsibilities fall outside the kitchen. Cooking makes me happy, even though here I don't… have much time for it."

Shen Yuan opens his mouth to say something. He doesn't even have the words, so he just sighs, rubbing his face.

"It's… nice that you have something like that," he says, and while it's true, it comes out a little bitter. He avoids Luo Binghe's gaze, sighing. "Well, there goes my idea that if *you* didn't have something like that and were still happy, I didn't have to have it."

Despite everything, Luo Binghe seems to laugh a little. He arranges the pillows a little more so they won't fall apart when he sits a little closer.

"There aren't many things in this life that make me happy," Luo Binghe says. Despite his words, his tone of voice isn't as cryptic as it could be. He offers one of the few remaining wontons to Shen Yuan, who gladly accepts it. "Happy days turned into happy moments, and happy moments turned into moments where only memories of when I was happy were present. I must admit…" His expression seems a little relieved, "that in the A-Yuan home, I have been happier than I have been in my own palace in recent years."

Shen Yuan keeps his gaze lowered, certain that if he saw the way Luo Binghe's eyes flashed at that moment, he'd really have to think about what he doesn't want to think about. And really, he only plans to deal with one emotional disaster at a time.

"I'm glad," he says, after a long period of tense silence, during which Luo Binghe is probably waiting for an answer from him. Shen Yuan doesn't feel feverish enough to have an excuse to miss the conversation or fall asleep sitting down. "You deserve… you deserve to be happy. Truly happy."

Luo Binghe doesn't reply. The truth is, Shen Yuan doesn't dare look at him either.

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

By dusk, his fever has dropped enough for Shen Yuan to insist that he needs to move at least a little.

“If I don't walk for at least thirty minutes, it'll hurt more later,” he protests. And he means it: his body hurts more when he stays still for too long, even if staying still for too long is the only thing that relieves his discomfort when his muscles decide to completely swell. It's one thing to cope with it at home, with his bed and his trusty blanket, but in the palace? Oh hell no.

Luo Binghe helps him dress and put on his shoes with careful movements, holding the comfortable sneakers with one hand while balancing Shen Yuan's weight with the other. Then he reaches for the cane and offers it to him without a word. The first steps are shaky. Luo Binghe guides him with silent firmness, one hand on his back and the other ready to catch him if he stumbles. Little by little, Shen Yuan manages to make his body obey, and with a satisfied sigh, he moves toward the door.

Chengle and Anhe are in the main imperial gardens, surrounded by the fake orange sunset that descends upon them like a blanket of color. They don't have wooden swords, but they do have a pair of long branches that eagerly fulfill their role. Their laughter mingles with the dry crack of the branches colliding, and Shen Yuan smiles helplessly. They must be so absorbed that no one notices them peeking out.

And right after: “Stop it, both of you brats. You’re rushing things,” Shen Jiu hisses at them, standing up from where he’d been sitting in the corner. He’s disheveled in a way Shen Yuan has only seen after difficult meetings, the typical messiness of repeatedly running his hands through his hair.

“If you attack too quickly, you might lose control of your movements. And what does losing control of your movements mean?” he asks, his tone less caustic than it could be; still, it's not far from the tone of a weary master.

“Losing the sword!” Chengle squeals, jumping up and down. “Jiu-ge! Did I do well? Is Ming-ge going to congratulate me when I see him again?”

“Better than before,” Jiu-ge replies, with a resigned sigh that still sounds almost proud despite himself. Then he turns to look at Anhe. “You haven’t done badly too.”

It's clear that something small like that makes Anhe feel proud, at least from the way his ears glow red.

Shen Yuan takes another step closer, but suddenly realizes that Luo Binghe has frozen like a statue. His arm is caught in a firm grip—so firm it feels like a stone wall—and a little tense, Shen Yuan tries to turn to look at him.

“Hey,” he murmurs. Luo Binghe doesn’t respond right away, doesn’t even seem to have heard him. His pale face, much paler than Shen Yuan has ever seen it before, is completely expressionless. “Is everything okay?”

Luo Binghe takes a moment longer to answer, as if he even has to strain to hear and understand that Shen Yuan has asked him something. Finally, seemingly somewhat dismayed, he simply says, “He… is teaching them.”

Shen Yuan sighs.

“Well, usually Ming-ge would,” he shrugs, trying to downplay it. “But Jiu-ge also took several years of martial arts classes. I guess he didn’t want Ming-ge to be the only one capable of putting up a real fight. Though he stopped training seriously when he was like sixteen or something.”

As far as Shen Yuan could recall, Jiu-ge had quit martial arts almost at the same time he'd started having more frequent night terrors. Between the Shen Yuan’s trips to the hospital and his fights about whether he should continue attending classes in person or start homeschooling (something Shen Yuan would never have wanted back then), he can barely recall any details other than the fact that his parents were genuinely very worried. In fact, Jiu-ge's quitting martial arts only took a major turn for the worse when they moved out of the family home and into a much more modern house downtown, much closer to the hospital, though far from the larger educational and social community they'd grown up with.

Meanwhile, Jiu-ge continues to correct the children. His instructions are brief, sharp, full of commands and precise pauses. The little ones obey diligently, repeating the movements over and over again until he barely nods, leaving them to return to their little duel. Finally, Shen Yuan protests a little and gets Luo Binghe to walk him the short distance to Jiu-ge, who greets them with a genuinely unfriendly face.

“How’s your fever?” is the first thing Jiu-ge asks.

Luo Binghe reluctantly lets him go, as if afraid that Shen Yuan would collapse without his support; it's not that Shen Yuan has such a fever that he can't stand on his own, in fact, he's much better right now! Though even Shen Jiu doesn't seem to think so, judging by the way he leans in slightly, probing his forehead with the palm of his hand.

“I’m fine,” he protests, pushing Jiu-ge’s hand away with a swat. “I had to walk for a moment or I’d be stiff as a board tomorrow.”

Shen Jiu makes a sound that could be a grunt of annoyance or an attempt at patience; either could be possible on his part. Then, he looks in Luo Binghe's direction with a gaze that makes even Shen Yuan's hair stand on end a little.

“When will you open the way back?”

“Whenever *Jiu-ge* likes to leave,” Luo Binghe says. Shen Yuan turns around only to find a disturbingly dangerous expression. Even if his robes aren’t imperial, right now, he seems to be wearing an Emperor’s mask, and only the red glow in his eyes is missing to make him genuinely dangerous. “It could be right now, if he wants.”

Shen Jiu tenses. Shen Yuan knows his brother too well not to recognize when he's ready to fight, if necessary, tooth and nail.

“You’re joking if you even *think* I’ll go off on my own and leave them here,” Jiu-ge hisses. Shen Yuan lets out an exasperated sigh.

“Jiu-ge,” he begins, but the look Jiu-ge gives him is urgent, almost desperate. Shen Yuan falls silent, as if he’d stepped on his foot under the table.

“No,” he says, and seems to choke. “*No,*” he repeats, with the same pale expression. There’s something strange about his face, in the twitching of his mouth, in the trembling of his eyes. It’s… ridiculous, but it’s almost as if Jiu-ge is *afraid.* “You don’t understand,” he hisses. “You can’t stay here. You *can’t* stay here any longer. I don’t know what stories he used to convince you to bring you both here, but…”

Shen Yuan snorts, rolling his eyes.

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” he interrupts. Jiu-ge looks at him as if he’d just kicked his back. “I made the decision to come here, *of my own free will.* I’m not staying forever, God, just a few days. Can you let me make my own decisions without throwing a tantrum about it?”

Shen Jiu clicks his tongue. His sneer is one of contempt as he says, “Not if your decisions are stupid.”

“My decisions are stupid?” Shen Yuan complains. Really, does Jiu-ge *even* understand? It’s not like Shen Yuan is happy to face Luo Binghe’s harem, the palace, or everything that it entails! He’s just trying to do what’s best for Chengle! Since when is doing what’s best for his son a stupid decision!?

But Shen Jiu does not give in.

“You’re *acting* stupid,” he snarls, clearly more annoyed than Shen Yuan is sure he has a right to feel. “Is that what you want me to tell you? What do you know of all the dangers there could be in this stupid world, what do you know of all the risk you could put yourself in?” His words are stumbling, muffled. He looks on the verge of hysteria in a way Shen Yuan can’t remember seeing him before. “Chengle may be *safe,* but you *don’t belong here.* What do you know of the danger you could put yourself in?”

“And what do *you* know?” Shen Yuan asks back.

Shen Jiu takes a deep breath; his hands are shaking, on the verge of hysteria. Shen Yuan feels only a little sorry for him; after all, it can't be *easy* for someone as realistic and practical as Jiu-ge to confront the fact that things like these—xianxia worlds completely parallel to his own known and familiar reality—exist.

As if drawn by a dangerous gravitational wave, Shen Jiu glances up from just behind Shen Yuan, where Luo Binghe stands, silent as an overprotective bodyguard. Whatever he sees on his face only makes Shen Jiu's already unsteady breathing tighten a little more into hyperventilation than would be comfortable for either of them.

Shen Yuan takes a small step in his direction, reaching out to offer some sort of comfort. Whatever he might have been trying to say (does he even know how you're supposed to comfort someone whose grasp on reality has been completely shattered? It's not like he's ever

experienced that before, and he's experienced it himself *and made* others experience that shock of unreality!) is struck dumb when they both hear the cheerful squeal of:

“Baba Yuan!”

Shen Yuan turns his head just in time to see the boy throw his branch sword to the ground and run full speed ahead. His embrace is tight, and while he doesn't hit him with the uncontrolled crushing force of Shaoshao, it's clear the boy can barely control himself as he hugs him, squeezing him so hard it's almost painful.

Despite this, Shen Yuan exhales, unaware that he'd been holding his breath tensely. He smiles, relieved, running his fingers through Chengle's hair. His wrist protests the effort, but he doesn't even care.

“Is Baba feeling better?” asks his sweet boy, his big eyes looking up at him with his chin resting on his stomach. Shen Yuan laughs, leaning down to kiss his tiny forehead. The boy has been running and jumping for most of the afternoon, because he is clearly red and perfect for a pre-dinner bath.

“A little bit,” Shen Yuan answers honestly. He takes advantage of the interruption to try to lighten the mood. Incredible! Not even Luo Binghe’s presence could make Shen Jiu and him start an argument! “Has my sweet boy been having fun?”

“Yes!” Chengle exclaims proudly, pointing to Anhe beyond. The boy waves the branch in his hand, waving it in the air, and Shen Yuan waves back with a smile. “An-ge and I play duels. We have to be better! And Jiu-ge helped us! He knows things. He doesn’t do them like Ming-ge, but he can tell us what we’re doing wrong and how to improve!”

Shen Yuan hums, listening. He lets Chengle lead him further into the center of the garden where he can show him everything he's been perfecting; behind him, Shen Yuan can hear Luo Binghe's footsteps. He doesn't hear Shen Jiu's, and when he turns his head, he notices that he's just standing there. He's pushed his glasses up onto his forehead, rubbing his eyes with his palms in a way that seems quite painful.

He looks at Luo Binghe, who gives him a small smile when Shen Yuan glances his way. Still, there's something about the way the small smile doesn't reach his eyes that Shen Yuan doesn't quite like.

He guesses that Jiu-ge is, after all, a difficult person to deal with, someone with serious problems with people with his specific personality type. People like Luo Binghe.

Even if he doesn't want to think about it, Sha Hualing's voice comes through like a shadow. His brother, the spitting image of Shen Qingqiu? He... barely remembers anything but terror from that nightmare, if he has to compare it. But if that were the case, he supposes some of Luo Binghe's misgivings about his brother might make a lot more sense than he wants to deal with.

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Shen Yuan refuses to eat in his room, mostly because being locked away for too long when he could be exploring the palace drives him crazy, as does going on vacation to an *all-inclusive* five stars hotel and staying in his room all day with room service. It's not a bad plan, but it's a huge waste of everything around him and the activities he can do in a very limited amount of time.

So, while Sha Hualing takes care of giving her children and Chengle a good bath, Shen Yuan sits in a large dining room lit by paper lanterns floating over the wide table, flipping through some of his bestiaries while he waits for Luo Binghe to return with dinner. The seat is comfortable and padded to an almost ridiculous degree, and if he had better hand mobility, he'd surely be taking notes. Unfortunately for him, he can only read, browsing through his favorites, appreciating the ink illustrations and the intricate calligraphy details of scholars' cultivators and demons with more desire for research than for fighting.

He's a little into it when he can feel someone watching him.

Shen Yuan looks up, searching the room. There are no places where anyone can hide, but only when he looks down at the table does he notice a small head peeking out and quickly hides when she makes eye contact with Shen Yuan.

"Hey," Shen Yuan moves his bestiary aside, bending under the table. Across the long table is a tiny girl Shen Yuan barely recognizes, with large dark eyes and wavy hair decorated with a great many pearls and crystalline flower hairpins. She looks older than Shen Yuan remembers from that dream, but something about her soft face makes her seem much more fragile than she had back then. Shen Yuan smiles at her, and the girl's eyes widen in surprise. "Aiya, I haven't had the pleasure of meeting you yet, little princess. What is your name?"

The little girl stands up. Shen Yuan feels a little dizzy as he sits upright, but the little girl continues to look at him with wide, curious eyes. She leans just a little closer before saying, "This is Little Princess Luo Baoxian. Are you Noble Consort Shen?"

Shen Yuan sighs. "That's what they call me," he says, shrugging and thanking Jiu-ge for agreeing to take a break before the most awkward dinner in the world. Then he looks at her up and down, curious. "Wow, your hair is very pretty. Do you like to style it a lot?"

The girl touches one of her hair strands. She twists it around her tiny fingers. There are tiny, shiny rings on her fingers, and there are even pearl necklaces and other jewelry around her neck. Even her ears have earrings that look heavy and painful. Baoxian has more jewelry than Shen Yuan has seen on several of Binghe's wives so far.

"Mom likes it," she says, lowering her head slightly. "Was Noble Consort Shen poisoned? This Little Princess heard he's very sick."

The little girl approaches with tiny steps. Shen Yuan tries to avoid being frightened by anything. She seems more than shy, almost fearful. Sha Hualing was quite right to call her a little doll: she really does look like one, with her expensive silks and enormous pile of jewelry, her impeccable hairstyle full of hairpins. It seems too busy for a little girl, almost uncomfortable.

“It’s not poison,” Shen Yuan explains, and the girl takes another small step. “My body is very weak. I’m recovering from doing so many things in such a short time. I got very sick because of that.”

“Wow,” the girl said, and she looked genuinely amazed. “Is that even possible?”

“For me, yes,” Shen Yuan said, trying to make his smile gentle. “Will the little princess stay for dinner?”

Baoxian makes a small face. She quickly takes two steps back.

“No,” she says, her voice low and gentle. She reaches into her sleeve and pulls out a small vial. Shen Yuan looks at it curiously. “I stole this from Mom.”

The girl puts the vial down on the table and quickly takes three steps back. It's too far away for Shen Yuan to grab, but he doesn't really have much interest in touching it either. It's a tiny little thing, but its insides are a bright, almost iridescent pink. It looks like the kind of thing with a literal, not-so-metaphorical, neon sign advertising how dangerous it is.

At least there's no role with a skull announcing danger. Shen Yuan supposes he should be grateful that not all the cliches are so explicitly present.

“That doesn’t look good,” Shen Yuan said, looking at the girl curiously. “Does Little Princess Baoxian know what her mother was planning to do with that?”

The girl nods. She takes another small step back.

“Mom wanted to drink it,” she says, and now Shen Yuan is looking at the bright pink bottle again with *a different* kind of comprehension. Oh. Holy fuck. “She said that when she drank it, she would get another child for Father Emperor. And so, Father Emperor would have to make her First Wife for giving him three children and forget about Noble Consort Shen.”

“Wow,” Shen Yuan swallows. The girl speaks as if she finds nothing odd in what she’s saying. Shen Yuan stares at the small vial as if it were a poison even worse than the one about to be filtered into his cup. He could handle assassination attempts, really, but *this*? It made absolutely sense to someone like Xiao Gongzhu, and its fucking worse. “That’s… too bad.”

The girl remains silent. She's wringing her hands in a way that looks almost painful, and her large eyes shine with tears that don't shed when she nods her head in a tiny nod.

“I don’t want a sister,” she says softly. “Not even a brother. If it’s a brother, Mom will do it like Zuo-ge. If it’s a sister, she’ll do it like me. I don’t like it,” and the girl is clearly on the verge of tears. Shen Yuan is terrified of getting up to comfort her and having the little girl run away. She’s no more than eight years old, but her gaze is much older and at the same time more innocent, much sadder. “Can Noble Consort Shen give Father Emperor a child and make sure Mom doesn’t?”

Despite everything, Shen Yuan feels hysterical laughter welling up. He shakes his head.

“I'm the father of one of his children,” he says, however. The girl seems confused, but doesn't interrupt him. “That's all I can do.”

“Father of one of his children?” she repeats softly. Her large eyes are still hazy.

“Mnh,” Shen Yuan nods, humming. He closes the bestiary with slow movements, not wanting to make any quick or loud actions that might scare the girl. “And believe me, that’s already so many, and lot of work. I’m not sure I want to do it again anytime soon.”

Baoxian doesn't seem to fully understand, but a tiny smile forms on her face nonetheless. It's a shy, almost fragile kind of smile, and Shen Yuan is relieved to see it.

The smile doesn't last long. She looks down at her hands, the shiny, tiny rings making even her small hands look heavy. Then, she seems to gather her courage, looking at the small vial on the table.

“Is Noble Consort Shen going to tell her?” she asks in a small voice. For the first time, she looks more scared than nervous, and Shen Yuan feels a burning desire to scoop the child into his arms and hide her from her horrible mother.

“Your mom?” Shen Yuan tilts his head, still wanting to confirm it. Baoxian nods quickly, looking horribly nervous. “No, I promise. It wouldn’t be good for you if she knows you came to talk to me, would it?”

The little girl hesitates for a moment, then denies even more vigorously, as if her whole body has finally found some relief from its tension.

“Thank you,” she whispers, and takes the small steps back to the table. She takes the small pink vial, and although Shen Yuan fears she will put it back, he is astonished when she slides it along the table. It is clear that she is using qi, and in a neat and precise manner, because it hardly seems to show any effort. Even the vial stops a foot away from him without even a wobble. “Noble Consort Shen must not tell Father Emperor either.”

Shen Yuan smiles knowingly. That can be fixed. “Not a word. I promise you.”

“Thank you,” Baoxian bows her head. She looks tiny, dressed in clothes that are almost bigger than her. “But will you still be a Noble Consort? Even if you don’t give Father Emperor new babies?”

Shen Yuan sighs. “I think so?” he says, and tries to smile even through how strange it still sounds in his ears. It doesn’t make sense. He can’t make sense of it. He’s not sure *he wants* the whole noble consort thing to make sense. “But I will speak to… your Father Emperor. And I will tell him your concerns. Is that okay?”

The girl barely raises her gaze. She nods and seems ready to run off as Shen Yuan takes courage to take the vial in his hands. The glass is cold and tiny, but heaven knows how chaotic or horrible the dose of apparently fertile aphrodisiac inside is. Shen Yuan gives a nasty shiver before shoving it into his sleeve to pretend it doesn't exist until he has to hand it over to Mu Qingfang or something for examination.

Baoxian is backing away again. Even so, Shen Yuan tries: “Don’t you want to stay for dinner? I can’t eat much. And your Father Emperor cooked. It would be a shame to waste the food.”

The girl's steps falter.

“Father Emperor cooks for Noble Consort Shen?” she hesitates. Shen Yuan, feeling horribly sorry for the girl and how easily children bribe with the Luo Binghe cooking, and feeling like he’s really going to have to hit him with a book or something for being so careless with his children, nods. “This Little Princess should… have dinner with Mom and Zuo-ge.”

And she frowns. She seems much more ready to burst into tears.

“I don’t think so,” Shen Yuan says, finally daring to extend his hand toward the girl. She looks at his hand as if it were a snake or something dangerous heading her way. “Well, this long title… I have more authority than your mother now, don’t I? Then, I request that the Little Princess Baoxian dine with me today. You can blame me when you must come back.”

The girl opens her eyes slightly. Then she nods, as if Shen Yuan were offering her a few stars from the sky in his palm.

She sits down in the chair next to Shen Yuan's. Then, with curious eyes, she looks at the book he had been reading. Shen Yuan gently moves it across the table.

“It’s a bestiary,” he says, and the girl seems to grip her hands tightly, as if she wants to touch it. “Don’t you want to read with me?”

“Does it have a lot of ugly monsters?” she asks. Shen Yuan is about to tell her that there might be some not-so-ugly ones that aren’t scary, but upon closer inspection, it’s not as if she seems… scared of monsters. In fact, she seems almost expectant, making Shen Yuan smile.

“The ugliest ones,” he says, and the girl curves her small smile into something closer to mirth. Shen Yuan opens the book to a page about Carnivorous Mole-Antbeasts, which aren’t exactly the ugliest, but they are visually weird. “You see these? Well, they won’t be able to see you, because they don’t have eyes. But they can smell that perfume of yours from a city away,” he says, and the girl’s eyes widen in fascination. “They also have two rows of teeth for crushing their prey.”

By the fourth horrible monster, the little girl seems much more relaxed, her eyes wide and filled with wonder, asking lots of questions. By the sixth horrible monster, Zi-Zhao arrives with a bathed and combed Chengle on her back.

“Baba!” Chengle greets him, waving both of his arms. Zi-Zhao doesn’t seem bothered by having the child on her back, which Shen Yuan assumes is something that happens… often with some of the children. Then, Chengle looks at Baoxian, his eyes wide and filled with doubt.

Baoxian steps back in her seat, lowering her hands from the table and looking tense as if she were ready to run away. Shen Yuan sighs.

“Chengle,” he says, and the boy looks at him with a small pout, his face frowning. “Don’t you want to come see some ugly monsters with me and Baoxian?”

Something in the little girl relaxes a little. Chengle is still somewhat sulking as he manages to get off Zi-Zhao's back and runs to the other seat next to Shen Yuan, almost climbing onto the table. The two children stare at each other, tense, and Shen Yuan takes a deep breath, thinking about how to intervene.

Just a moment later, it is Baoxian who says, “Cheng-di.”

Chengle shifts nervously. He ducks his head just before muttering a sulky, “Xian-jie.”

The little girl is silent for a long moment. Then she looks up, wringing her little hands before saying, “I’m… I’m so glad to see that Cheng-di is safe. And happy. Now. Even though he’s far away.”

“It’s because of Baba Yuan,” Chengle says quickly. Shen Yuan sighs, a little exasperated, but his boy doesn’t even seem to notice. “Baba is good. The best. And he cares a lot and takes good care of me. And we’re going to move out, and Baba will give me a room just for my toys. And he takes better care of me than anyone.”

Baoxian looks up at Shen Yuan, as if seriously analyzing Chengle's words. Shen Yuan tries to make his face look trustworthy enough for the girl to have a good association with it.

“Good,” the girl says finally. Whatever she’s been thinking seems to be enough to bring a small smile to her face. “If he makes Cheng-di happy, he must be the best.”

Shen Yuan sighs deeply, thanking for having two hands more than ever before in his life, because he can reach out and gently pat the two curly heads on either side. Chengle relaxes much more quickly after that, and although Baoxian looks tense during the first few pats, she doesn't take long to relax either. Shen Yuan smiles and turns the next page of the bestiary, and three monsters later, Baoxian is relaxed enough to ask questions again.

By the time Jiu-ge arrives, led by a servant, they've finished the bestiary of poisonous beasts and moved on to another, one of birds and creatures of the sky. Shen Jiu has a weary expression, his eyes slightly puffy and his face pale. Shen Yuan guesses he must have fallen asleep.

“Isn’t it late already?” Shen Jiu protests as he enters, his voice slightly hoarser. Shen Yuan is almost certain he was just hoping to arrive, eat, and run away again, so seeing an empty table isn’t doing his plans any good. Nor is the fact that Chengle waves at him from across the table, calling for his attention to come and sit down.

Shen Jiu blinks, clearly exhausted, and walks toward them with slow steps. Baoxian abandons her attentive gaze on the drawings in the bestiary and immediately tenses. She doesn't look as scared as before, but she still seems to be dealing with that tense, rigid nervousness of someone who doesn't know whether she's going to be scolded or not.

“Oh, *another* one,” Shen Jiu says, his tone gentle, almost curious. Something about his expression is strangely difficult for even Shen Yuan to read, though if he’s honest, he hasn’t been able to read his brother’s face correctly many times in the past. “What’s your name?”

“This is Little Princess Luo Baoxian,” she replies, her voice faint. Her head is lowered more in nervousness than in any kind of respectful acknowledgment.

Shen Yuan snorts slightly in amusement when Shen Jiu, instead of responding to the greeting in the normal way, simply bows ridiculously theatrically, exaggerating the gesture as if he were in an imperial court rather than before a tiny half-demon princess. Baoxian even looks slightly stunned, blinking in confusion just before the corner of her mouth curls into a giggle. The tension in her shoulders eases a little.

“Princesses, princes. I’m surrounded by royalty,” and Shen Jiu manages to make this sound like a complaint as he straightens, shooting even Chengle a mocking look. He takes a seat next to Baoxian. “I’m Jiu-ge. So, little princess, what horrible things is my brother showing you in those books?”

“Monsters and beasts!” Chengle answers excitedly. He points at the book so hard that Shen Yuan fears for the integrity of the page. “Jiu-ge, look! These are Midnight Blind Cranes! They have echolocators. And they eat fish big like puppies!”

“They’re like feathered bats,” Shen Jiu complains, his face clearly disgusted. Shen Yuan can’t decide whether it’s his disgruntled voice or the twist of his mouth that makes Chengle laugh, and Baoxian even reaches for his mouth to stifle a giggle.

Despite himself and his enormous disgust with what a huge idiot his brother is, Shen Yuan finds himself smiling. Shen Jiu has relaxed a little in his seat, paying attention to the drawings the girl is showing him from the great bestiary, his eyes looking tired but clearly curious despite his reluctance with the whole big and dangerous world Luo Binghe has brought him into.

Baoxian carefully turns the page. Shen Jiu leans over, looking curiously at the drawing of a little bird.

“Oh,” he says, touching the edge of the scroll. Shen Yuan sees, with only a hint of concern, that his nails look torn and chewed in a way that could almost be painful. “What is this?”

“This is… *Iridescent Kingfishers*,” Baoxian half-explains, half-reads. There are several more drawings of those tiny birds; something about Shen Jiu’s attention being exclusively on her seems to unhinge her. “They have a beautiful song. And the males’ feathers glow in the dark. The brighter they glow, the more attractive they are to the females. And they make colorful nests. With all colors.”

Shen Yuan can't help but feel familiar in her shyness, which opens to attention just as it had with Chengle so many months ago, to the boy now practically perched on his lap, receiving a hug while snooping through drawings of strange birds from the demonic realm. He places a small kiss in Chengle's hair, simply touched.

“Interesting,” Shen Jiu murmurs. Beside him, leaning across the table, Baoxian nods seriously. Then, her small mouth curls into a tiny but determined frown just before she says:

“But they are not ugly.”

Jiu-ge hums a nod. Baoxian curves her little mouth a little more, almost looking pouty for a moment before her face returns to the serene visage of a doll, as if she's restraining herself from making an expression. In a small, fragile voice, she simply says, "I like ugly beasts."

Shen Jiu stares directly at Shen Yuan, raising an eyebrow. Shen Yuan shrugs. Let the little girl have a taste for ugly beasts, really!

“Why is that?” asks Jiu-ge, leaning slightly toward the drawing the girl is looking at. It’s one of those pretty little birds, a tiny, feathered bird hovering, balancing on the parchment as if flying through it. Baoxian’s tiny brow is slightly furrowed, her attention shifting from the drawing to her ring-covered hands.

She silently fiddles with the edges of one of her rings before saying:

“Nobody expects them to be pretty.”

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Luo Binghe arrives when they're almost at the end of the bird’s bestiary. He arrives with a tray, but not just him, as several servants follow him, their respective trays, and they begin to arrange everything neatly on the table in an array of dishes that could put a five-star restaurant to shame. Shen Yuan carefully closes and sets the bestiaries aside, and Zi-Zhao comes over to retrieve them, telling him she'll return them to his rooms. Baoxian looks a little disappointed, so Shen Yuan reminds himself that maybe he should leave some in the palace instead of just kidnapping all the interesting reading material. After all, a girl deserves to have some of the bestiaries of ugly monsters around.

For a long moment at the table, Luo Binghe stands there, watching as both seats on either side of Shen Yuan are occupied. His expression looks almost lost, as if he doesn't know what to do before taking the seat directly across from him. Shen Yuan tries not to laugh; seriously, that's a long table full of empty seats! It's not like he has to sit next to him!

Luo Binghe serves the dishes, handing out the softest and blandest ones for Shen Yuan. Shen Yuan doesn't miss the way Jiu-ge looks at everything, examining and checking that others besides him have eaten from the same pot and practically eating anything Shen Yuan or Chengle have tried. It's clear he doesn't trust them at all, and Shen Yuan can only sigh. He supposes it makes perfect sense.

Chengle chatters between bites, busy explaining to Shen Yuan why when they get their new home they have to get one with a garden so An-ge can visit and play a lot, with all the valid reasons that if it’s an apartment without a garden or a terrace An-ge will be too satisfied with sitting around reading, and that can’t be the case because he needs to run around and have fun too!! In fact, Shen Yuan is paying so much attention to Chengle that when he notices Luo Binghe’s tense gaze, he is momentarily startled.

But Luo Binghe isn't actually looking in his direction, or at Jiu-ge. In fact, when Shen Yuan follows his gaze, Luo Binghe is staring tensely at Baoxian's plate.

The girl seems to have barely touched the little food she's served herself; the lotus roots are just more crushed pieces on her plate. She absentmindedly spears a slice of pickled radish, breaking it up between her chopsticks before popping a tiny bite into her mouth. She hasn't even touched the bowl of rice.

Luo Binghe finally speaks: “Is the food not to Princess Baoxian’s liking?”

The girl flinches, as if she hadn't even expected to be watched. Her face paled before turning red. She shook her head, lowering her eyes to her plate.

“Father Emperor’s cooking is delicious,” she murmurs, her voice soft as a whisper. “But Mom says I should eat lightly. Only vegetables and soup. Otherwise, I’ll grow too tall and lose my delicacy. She says little princesses should resemble flowers, not trees.”

Shen Yuan feels a wave of nausea so strong that he's sure the indignant expression he's throwing at Luo Binghe could physically hit him; he doesn't even know where the unpleasant chill is coming from, but it makes his eyes sting. Luo Binghe doesn't look any better, pale in a way that's clearly not normal, motionless with his chopsticks suspended in the air. It's absolutely obvious that he seems to have no idea whatsoever about any of this.

His gaze remains clouded for a long moment. Shen Yuan is trying to swallow his indignation, trying to find the right words to intervene, when Luo Binghe seems to wake up. He blinks and sets aside his own chopsticks, grabbing a longer set and a new bowl. With steely determination, without even saying a word, he loads the bowl with small pieces of sesame and honey seasoned chicken, tender sliced beef with their crusts from being cooked over grill, and small, tender buns filled with meat.

With the bowl full, he places it right in front of the girl, who looks at it with big, almost scared eyes, as if the meat was going to jump out of the bowl and attack her.

“That’s not right,” Luo Binghe finally says, his voice somewhere between firm and icy. “A girl is not a flower, and even if she were a flower or a tree, both need strong roots to grow.”

Baoxian looks at her father, clearly unsure. Her eyes wander over each person at the table, with something close to *terror.* She seems to be waiting for someone to say something, for someone to restrain her, for her to be scolded for just being around so much food. Shen Yuan doesn't intervene except by giving her a gentle smile, a same smile he gives Binghe when he sees the way the chopsticks tremble in his hand.

“Your father is right,” and it is Shen Jiu who speaks, startling Shen Yuan almost like an electric shock. His mouth curves unpleasantly as he says *‘father,’* but it’s to be expected, given the obvious circumstances. “A young girl needs more than vegetables and soup to grow healthy and strong. What does it matter to be a flower when what you have to do is grow?”

Even Chengle chimes in. He takes one of his own dumplings from his plate and places it on Baoxian's plate, his little face extremely serious and focused.

“These are my favorites,” he says, his voice firm and determined. “They give me so much strength! And I’m strong and fast. Faster than An-ge, and An-ge is so much more of a demon than I am! He should be faster! And, and, if you eat more, we can play together. And train together. And prepare to hunt ugly evil beasts and become stronger to beat them.”

The girl looks at them all, surprised. Her lower lip trembles, the corner of her mouth sliding down in an almost sad grimace. Her large eyes are filled with tears that spill down her cheeks when she blinks.

“It’s all right,” Shen Yuan says, once he manages to swallow his indignation, softened by the girl’s gentle tears. Shen Yuan is absolutely weak toward those soft, dark eyes, the little girl’s miserable face, as if she’s being held between a rock and a hard place, despite all the kind intentions surrounding her. “I promise. You can eat as much as you want, and no one will be angry with you if you do.”

Baoxian lets more fat tears fall down her face. Shen Yuan searches his sleeve for a handkerchief, unable to remember if he even got one, but it's Shen Jiu who steps forward, using the sleeves of his own business suit to wipe away the girl's tears. Like open dam, she just seems to cry and cry in place, trembling a little but not flinching from the gentle touch, until her trembling pout seems to clench into a thin line of determination.

She takes a deep breath, staring at everyone again, and still with tears in her eyes, she picks up her chopsticks again. Shen Yuan watches her with a small smile as the girl, as if facing a great and powerful beast, takes the dumpling Chengle has placed on her plate and brings it to her mouth. Her mouth full, her eyes sparkle as she chews, clearly enjoying the taste.

Luo Binghe doesn't speak again during dinner. Baoxian eats the entire bowl of meat, repeats his portion of rice, and when the tears stop falling from her face, she fights with Chengle in a chopstick duel over the last dumpling—something Shen Jiu can't allow, because he mercilessly and with a mischievous gleam in his eye eats it, earning complaints from both children. Shen Yuan has already resigned himself to the fact that Chengle is more likely to sit on his lap than beside him, but even in this circumstance, Luo Binghe doesn't get up to claim the seat next to him. He seems to be struggling to finish his own food.

Only later, when Shen Yuan should already be asleep in the enormous bed, with Chengle already snoring, wrapped in sheets and pillows, does he sigh and get out of bed. He knocks on the door connecting to Luo Binghe's rooms, and even though he gets no response, he enters anyway.

Luo Binghe isn't asleep. He hasn't even changed for bed. His shoulders are slumped, his expression lost as he stares at the wall. Only when Shen Yuan moves into his range of vision does he blink, as if he really hasn't noticed him approaching.

“A-Yuan,” his voice sounding hoarse. “Are you good? Is it the fever? Do you need…?”

“I won’t tell you it’s not your fault,” Shen Yuan says, before regretting it. Luo Binghe’s expression falls. “But it’s not… *entirely* your fault.”

Luo Binghe looks away. He lets out a sigh so deep it seems to disarm him.

“I haven’t been a good father,” he says. Shen Yuan sighs, because he can’t hide the truth behind his finger or deny the things that are clearly staring him in the face. Children martyred by harem policies, a girl who won’t eat because of her mother’s orders, a cruel boy unable to understand how wrong it is to simply run someone through with a sword just because he feels like it. Even if it’s not *entirely* Luo Binghe’s fault, denying his guilt there… is impossible. “I didn’t do something so *basic.* A-Yuan. My mother…” His voice cracks. Shen Yuan moves forward enough for him to hold him when Luo Binghe seems to truly crumble, a house of cards shaking in a storm. “My mother had *nothing.* She had nothing, and yet she gave me *everything.* How… How is it possible that I have everything and have given them *nothing?*”

Shen Yuan lets Luo Binghe hold onto him like an anchor. His grip is firm without being painful. Shen Yuan buries his hands in Luo Binghe's hair, allowing the man to hold onto him, the man's shattering sobs sounding as if they are breaking him from within.

“A kid is the child of *both* parents,” Shen Yuan says, drowning in his own shock. “Yes, that’s true. *You bear* some responsibility. But not all. You’re not the one who’s been taking the food out of her mouth. Her mother’s actions and decisions are not your fault or your responsibility.”

“But I *could*...”

Shen Yuan brushes Luo Binghe's hair with his fingers, raking his nails across his scalp. The great, mighty Emperor looks nothing more than a hulking crybaby, crumbling under such a gentle touch, writhing as if undeserving of it, but unable to pull away. Shen Yuan sighs.

“*Could have, would have,* none of that exists,” he murmurs. Luo Binghe’s hands are shaking. “There is only now, and tomorrow. What you didn’t do before, you can’t change, but you can *choose* to do things better from now on. Be better for them. Correct the mistakes. Give them everything they deserve.”

Luo Binghe only sobs harder. He doesn't respond, but clings tighter to Shen Yuan, as if letting him go causes him physical pain. Shen Yuan keeps brushing his hair with his fingers, rubbing circles on his back, letting him crumble.

Even if his body is weak, Shen Yuan is sure that his heart has enough strength to catch him, hold him, and not let him fall.

Chapter End Notes

LBH: Ah, finally, A-Yuan's going to ask me if I'm willing of leaving my harem for him, then I'll tell him-...
SY: Are you happy?
LBH: A-Yuan WHY?

SJ: God, how many of /these/ do you have?
SJ: *looking at Baoxian intently* ... you will have one less, apparently

QIJIU BABY QIJIU BABY QIJIU BABY !!!!!!! :P COME ON, I HAVE GOLDEN STARS FOR EVERYONE WHO GUESSED. DEFINITELY. HEHEHEHEHEHE

Guys. I'm an honest person. I don't usually cry writing angst scenes or anything like that. In fact, I usually get a little emotional when I'm reading them for editing, but writing them doesn't hurt me. So here I am, Baoxian is crying in front of a bunch of people who are genuinely worried about her, and I CRIED WHEN I WRITED. I CRIED. I REMEMBER THAT SCENE AND MY MOUTH IS TREMBLING. MY EYES ARE FILLED WITH TEARS AND I HAVE GOOSEBUMPS. ARE THESE MY TRAUMAS EXPOSED IN A FANFIC? PROBABLY, AND IN A WAY I DID NOT KNOW
I also cried during that final scene with Binghe lmao but anyway, I blame it on the fact that I was already emotional about the baby Baobao scene, I swear I'm not THAT emotional

ANYWAY. THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING MWAH MWAH MWAAAAAH. I REALLY MISSED YOU ALL SO MUCH THIS WEEK. My eyes needed to get used to the medication and I needed to get used to not having so much influence with the black background and white letters. Should I switch to sepia background? I accept advice /hj
I HOPE YOU REALLY ENOYED THE CHAPTER!! Don't forget to kudo-comment-interact so we can have fun together! :P I've been a bit absent from answering comments because of my eyes and trying to regulate my sleep schedule (the sleep schedule thing isn't working out), but I'll be on it these days ;P Hugs and kisses to everyone, thank you SO much
See you soon!!! :3

Chapter 34: Second time the same thing happens

Chapter Notes

KICKS THE DOOR HELLO GUYS, DID YOU MISS ME? Yes, I know, it took me a long time, in my defense they were doing preoperative studies and one of those was putting weird drops in my eyes that left me legally blind for like a day. I literally had to sign a piece of legal shit that someone was going to pick me up from the clinic and I wouldn't blame them if something happened to me because they wouldn't let me leave without an escort. I don't recommend having vision problems /hj
BUT, all the preoperative studies went very well, and my surgery date is November 4th!!! I'll have about 1 week of recovery or something, but I hope to advance chapters and I'll have my sister write the author notes for me lol :P

My reunion gift to you is this beast of 16k words. Yes I know. Guys. I asked you on tumblr if you wanted me to divide the chapter into 2 and you basically told me "SHOVE THE WHOLE THING DOWN MY THROAT", I'm just a simple soul who obeys...

Chapter warning: Shen Yuan™, mentions of what happened last summer (Shen Qingqiu), past of Shen Qingqiu™, panic attack, asthma attack, more mentions of child neglect, unintentional childhood exposure to a chaotic environment
Please kindly tell me if I missed any warnings, literally A LOT happens in this chapter

Enjoy the chapter! :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Morning comes all too quickly; Shen Yuan slinks as quietly as he can back into bed and pretends he definitely didn't spend a large part of the night comforting Luo Binghe and a large part of it transformed into a stress pillow specially for Heavenly Demon, physically unable to break free from his grasp. To his immense luck and relief, Chengle has slept through the night after a stressful and energetic day, and Shen Yuan allows himself to doze off a bit until his toddler wakes up a little later, lazily demanding cuddles and hugs before planning what he's going to do for the day.

It's his last day at the palace. For a while, at least.

It's not that Shen Yuan doesn't plan to return at some point. It's just…

Well, the palace is a big change from his normal life. And a huge mess. And he may have totally and completely underestimated what spending a few days in the palace entailed, what with Luo Binghe's damn harem. Even if he had digested the fact of a xianxia universe and absolutely weird things pretty well… well! Palace politics, harem, *Luo Binghe*! There's

definitely more on the table than he first thought, like just a little jaunt for Chengle to have a happy reunion with his mother and siblings.

Honestly, at this point… he's kind of missing his quiet life of doing nothing. Even if doing nothing means he'll have to confront his own thoughts and emotions regarding… everything, well. Maybe he's being ridiculous, but he feels like the last three days have been harder than three weeks, and at least one day of them he's spent almost the entire day in bed, feverish and completely lost in his own head. How used he is to simply not leaving his house! Really! He doesn't know if that's good, bad, or worrying. Although of course he knows Dr. Jun would have an opinion on that.

"We're going home today," he says to Chengle, and contrary to the boy's disappointed pout, his sweet little face seems like it's New Year's again, completely excited to return to his quiet, cozy routine. "So, how about we ask Zi-Zhao to take you to breakfast with your mom and spend some time with her? Maybe you can read a book or play together for a while. I'll stay with your Uncle Jiu and Doctor Mu here, how about that?"

"Yes!" and then, his child seems to notice something, and makes a sour face. *Of course.* "And Baba will *also stay with Father Emperor."*

"My love," Shen Yuan reached out to pinch Chengle's cheek. Ah, so soft and tender, he could actually bite it. "Do you think Uncle Jiu will let your Emperor Father misbehave?"

It's funny how quickly that convinces Chengle, which seems to speak for both Shen Jiu and Luo Binghe. The boy even agrees to dress up in the pretty robes Zi-Zhao brought for him, and Shen Yuan is sure that combing and styling Chengle's little head is not recommended exercise for his slowly healing doll, but he can't help himself. After so much chaos, a minimally normal moment with him feels so fragile that walking away from it is almost painful.

Still, he does. Chengle is combed and ready, smelling sweet of hair cream and clean clothes, and Shen Yuan can't help but pull him into a tight hug. Chengle never refuses his hugs: he holds him tightly, with his firm, warm little arms, and Shen Yuan can't help but adore his sweet boy. Who would have thought he'd literally go to an alternate reality for him? What a life he's got for himself.

"In the afternoon, we'll have tea with your mom and Lingling. We still have some sweets and snacks to give your An-ge and Shao-mei," Shen Yuan tells the sweet little boy, who happily lets himself be hugged and cuddled, even at the prospect of sharing his treats. "And we'll see if we can come to an agreement on when we can visit them again. And your little brothers. Is that okay?"

"Yes!" and his sweet little boy beams. "I like the palace with Baba Yuan. It's prettier. And Baba speaks rudely when older brothers are rude." His little boy wrinkles his nose, and Shen Yuan can't resist laughing a little at him. "Everything is prettier with Baba."

"Aiya, you're going to make me cry," Shen Yuan murmurs, squishing his sweet little boy's cheeks a little beneath his hands. Chengle has the most adorable little face, the brightest eyes,

and looks so genuinely happy, it’s as if Shen Yuan is holding a tiny, radiant sun. His little boy is the most precious thing, he truly is. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Secret! Yes!” Chengle huddles closer, his little eyes excited. “I keep secrets well. I like them.”

“Oh, I know,” Shen Yuan runs his hands through his hair, marveling at the tender little boy looking up at him with those big, sweet eyes. Truly, his poor heart will never fully accept it. “My life is so much brighter since you came into it.”

It's not really a secret; he thinks anyone could tell. Isn't his own mother the most excited about her grandson, and equally excited that Shen Yuan is happy with him by his side?

It's not that he had a bad life. How could he have a bad life, with all the comforts! It would be absolutely ridiculous and completely disrespectful to every working-class person if Shen Yuan complained that something in his life was bad. Yes, his health was terrible, but he didn't need to invest time in work, and although he was good at studying, he didn't need to study to earn some kind of long-term livelihood. He had an extremely privileged life.

It was just all… a boring thing. Days and days piled up, the same as the one before, overwhelmingly chaotic in their monotony. Now, even if he wants to remember something specific, it’s almost as if a gray cloud is clouding his own memories. The colorful walls filled with drawings look empty, and everything seems to have a strange, artificial blue halo, with screens as his only entertainment blurring his coherence of time. The memories of day and night have the same kind of light, and in reality, he’s not sure he can tell them apart.

Now, every moment with Chengle sparkles. His child brings a radiance that Shen Yuan isn't sure he can distinguish, or even understand. His memories, his mind, *his entire life* feel so colorful it's almost overwhelming. Like entering a totally different place without leaving his own home.

Chengle has a huge smile on his face. It beams, and he launches into another tight hug, laughing out loud when Shen Yuan begins tickling his sides.

“Come on, come on, you'll mess up your hair and your mom will think I'm not combing it properly,” Shen Yuan murmurs, when his boy has escaped his tickling, his cheeks rosy and radiant. “Aren't you hungry? Let me call Zi-Zhao. Send my good morning to Lingling!”

When Chengle finally leaves the room holding Zi-Zhao's hand through the door leading to the study, the silence they leave behind is so vast it feels as if it's hitting the high walls. Shen Yuan sits on the edge of the bed for a moment, simply taking deep breaths once, twice, three times. Someone has placed fresh flowers in vases in various parts of the room, sweet and tender camellias and chrysanthemums of a soft pink color. Shen Yuan notes, only with a touch of hysteria, that they are flowers so utterly normal and belonging to a *normal world* that, aside from Jiu-ge or his own things, they are the most normal thing he's seen in days.

It feels like your very concept of normality has been shattered.

The air smells faintly of incense. It's more the residue left behind by some servant after cleaning, and Shen Yuan forces himself to stand and open the windows overlooking the imperial gardens, vaguely trying to vent the strange, hushed feeling that hangs in the empty room. Even if they're in what appears to be an illusion of sunlit gardens underground, a beautiful illusion is better than confronting a fierce red sun and a world of beasts outside.

Since he's on his feet, he supposes, he should organize things for his return. More to keep himself doing something that keeps him from overthinking than to have any real energy left in his body; while he doesn't feel feverish, he *still* feels exhausted. He should take it easy, but he's taking it easy enough!

In fact, he's just finishing emptying his sleeves when he comes across the small vial of pink potion Baoxian had stolen from his mother. Shen Yuan grimaces, shaking it curiously. The liquid still has the same strange, radiant pink glow, and seems to somehow activate when shaken, taking on an even stronger and brighter color if that were possible. He can't put a name to it, even if with the brief description he's gleaned of its expected effects, he can compile a long list of a bunch of rare flowers that *might* have a similar effect...

In fact, by the time Mu Qingfang arrives with his tinctures and other medical supplies on a tray to attend to him, Shen Yuan has sat up in bed again, exhausted from minimal exertion as if he's run a marathon, examining the small pink potion in his hand as if it were a particularly dangerous snake. Honestly, Shen Yuan believes he would be much less afraid of a snake if that were the case.

Mu Qingfang's face is pale and haggard, and the whiteness of his face deepens even further when he sees the vial of pink potion in Shen Yuan's hand. He looks so horrified that Shen Yuan immediately feels in danger even if he just touches the glass.

Mu Qingfang's steps are slightly hesitant. He places the tray of tinctures, herbal teapot, and other items on the bed beside him, and before Shen Yuan has any time to process it, Mu Qingfang has snatched the small vial from his hand. He examines it against the light, watching the liquid inside move, the unnaturally bright hue that covers it when he shakes it. At this point, Mu Qingfang looks *sick*.

“This one *is afraid* to ask,” Mu Qingfang says, his voice choked, “but where did Shen Gongzi get *this*?” And before Shen Yuan can even consider whether telling Mu Qingfang about Baoxian stealing it from her mother counts as betraying the child’s trust—technically, he’s not telling her mother or father, so it *should* be fine—Mu Qingfang pulls back with an even more horrified expression, testing the temperature on his face with a cold hand. “Junshang *wouldn’t dare.* He *might want to*, of course, but he’d never dare…”

Shen Yuan raises an eyebrow, curious. Before he can control himself, his traitorous mouth blurts out: “What’s it supposed to be? I mean, I have a rough idea,” and he grimaces slightly. Mu Qingfang wraps the vial in a handkerchief in his sleeve, as if the mere thought of touching it is something she doesn’t want to deal with. “But is that exactly…?”

Mu Qingfang looks at him with an arched eyebrow. He seems to be considering whether to throw the vial in his face or not. His conscience seems to win, because he tucks the

handkerchief-wrapped bottle into his sleeve before saying, “There is only one type of flower that can produce such a striking potion from its petals. A New Life Peony.”

“Oh,” Shen Yuan says, feeling a chill run through him as if all the blood had drained from his face. “Fuck.”

“Yeah, something like that,” Mu Qingfang says, seemingly satisfied that Shen Yuan’s immediate reaction is one of horror. How could it not be horror anyway!? That was a pathetic wife plot to justify breeding kink! Shen Yuan didn’t care how much more money than him the perverts who decided that this was the next story arc had paid, fuck it — none of it seems sexy to him at all!! Why did a plant *like that exist*!? Capable of killing someone with its strong poison if it wasn’t inseminated immediately!! Eww!! Where the hell was the sexy thing in that!? “Was it Junshang who…?”

“Hell no,” Shen Yuan quickly replies, no longer hesitant. Why would Mu Qingfang be so desperate to take it away from her anyway? Shen Yuan supposes it must be extremely dangerous for people who don’t have, well, the parts necessary for the plant to do what it did! Like an instant-kill poison or something. He *definitely* refuses to think of any other possibility. “Uh, let’s just say I got it by… accident. The only thing I can say is that Xiao Gongzhu was the one who was planning to take it willingly with some wicked plan to give Binghe another child.”

Mu Qingfang remains silent for a long moment. Then, slowly, he exhales exhaustedly.

“Does Junshang know?” he asks. There’s no emotion in his voice, and Shen Yuan shrugs.

“I made a promise,” he says, his expression only worsening the exhausted look on Mu Qingfang’s face. Even though he looks no older than his twenties, there’s something old and exhausted, almost jaded, that’s impossible to erase from his face. “He’s not supposed to find out.”

Mu Qingfang nods, however. His expression turns thoughtful, just before the corners of his mouth rise, just a little. Shen Yuan has a bad, bad feeling about this.

“In that case, Xiao Gongzhu probably doesn’t know it was stolen either, right?” he asks. Shen Yuan hums a nod, and it’s as if life spurts into Mu Qingfang’s eyes, a genuinely vibrant brightness. “If so, this Mu knows a contraceptive plant whose pigment is… somewhat similar. If diluted with a quantity of a tincture that causes certain *slightly* contraindicative effects, and if *someone* were to replace the contents of the bottle before returning it…”

Shen Yuan feels the smile that begins to grow on his face so wide and difficult to control for the sake of decorum that he doesn't even try.

“Doctor Mu,” he says, in a falsely shocked voice, “are you proposing a crime against one of Junshang’s wives?”

“A public favor,” Mu Qingfang corrects, with such unwavering seriousness it’s almost comical. “She’ll be safe… *eventually*. Shen Gongzi doesn’t have to worry. Xiao Gongzhu has survived without any retaliation longer than this palace’s patience can tolerate, and no one

will miss her if she must isolate herself in her chambers due to severe illness for a week or two."

Shen Yuan can't help but burst out laughing; after all, even if it's not his decision, it's not that Xiao Gongzhu doesn't deserve it.

Mu Qingfang's smile widens, a warm glow in his eyes, and with the matter settled, he begins to prepare and separate the ointments for him. Shen Yuan drinks his bitter, horrendous tea and complains as much as he can about its disgusting taste, but the truth is that he no longer has a cough, only a slight itching. The combination of antibiotics and weird medicine from the best xianxia doctor he has ever met truly is an incredible thing.

Mu Qingfang changes the bandages and adds new ointments to his still swollen wrist before leaving. Only then is Zi-Zhao back, bringing him water and helping him fasten his new robes and belt with saintly patience, even seeming pleased with her work. In truth, if Luo Binghe doesn't give her a raise... Well, Shen Yuan might be hiring! It's not like her horns can't be disguised with a good wool hat! So, what if her skin is an unnatural color!? It would be rude to ask her why, so none of his neighbors would!

And speaking of the devil, Luo Binghe seems to wake up only when Shen Yuan invades his room with water.

"Go on, rise and shine," he says, even if he's not in much of a mood. He places the water pitcher on a small table next before approaching the bed, hesitating only a moment before sitting down and setting his cane aside. "Did you get any sleep? I was… kind of worried about that."

That's not entirely a lie. Luo Binghe has had the same tired, dark circles under his eyes ever since that strange, chaotic qi deviation; a day of little rest and clearly having used Xin Mo to move from one world to another… he certainly doesn't seem to be recovering. Shen Yuan carries a cup of water and breathes a sigh of relief when Luo Binghe sits up a little in the sheets, accepting it and avoiding the embarrassment of having his trembling hand spill water on him trying to offer it to him.

"I slept a bit," Luo Binghe murmurs. He looks more exhausted than the day before, and Shen Yuan sighs. "Was I too much of a bother to A-Yuan?"

"No, not at all," Shen Yuan replies quickly. Anything to wipe that frown off his face. "Just… whatever you need. To be good. Okay?"

"A-Yuan is careless with his words," Luo Binghe mutters. He looks at the bottom of his cup as if he'll find something there, even if it's just some fresh water to hydrate him after crying a river. "If you say it so lightly, I could take you literally."

Shen Yuan clicks his tongue. "Silly," he says, sighing. "You know what I mean."

Luo Binghe hums an assent; Shen Yuan supposes that the fact that Luo Binghe doesn't take the opportunity to joke is indicative of how bad he feels. He drains the cup of water, and Shen

Yuan is quickly offering more; in his own experience, after a long cry, it never hurts to hydrate, and he doesn't think being a Heavenly Demon changes that.

Luo Binghe drinks two more cups of water before refusing the next one. The two of them remain silent; it's not tense, though it's not entirely comfortable either. It almost feels expectant.

“If A-Yuan doesn’t mind, there are important things I must do today,” Luo Binghe says after a long moment. “There are more… situations I’ve neglected, completely beyond my control and knowledge. I must take matters into my own hands more directly than I was doing.”

“Is there anything I can help with?” Shen Yuan asks after a brief pause. He doesn’t really know what help he could offer, even if he can get a general idea of what matters Luo Binghe is referring to, but…

“I appreciate it,” Luo Binghe says, his voice as smooth as silk. His tone is peaceful and centered. Even his expression seems quite Zen-like, to be honest. “But these are things I must take charge of myself. They were always my duty, one I’ve been neglecting, and it wouldn’t be fair for others to bear the burden of my own mistakes.”

Even if there's no exact reason, Shen Yuan feels an enormous warmth rising against his chest. Pride, he thinks, even if he doesn't really have any justification for feeling proud of Luo Binghe. It's just that there's a world of difference between the man standing here now taking action and the despotic emperor he met months ago; still the same person, of course, but as if the past few months have molded him differently, softer, more... *human*.

“That’s good,” Shen Yuan finds himself saying, a smile practically spreading across his face. “That’s… you’re doing the right things now. And I know you’ll keep doing it in the future. I trust you.”

And it's not a lie.

It's almost easy, these days, to differentiate the Luo Binghe he has read about from the man who's working his tail off. What began as a sort of dispute to get his son back has morphed into trying to win Chengle's affection and goodwill, to come to terms with his mistakes and the things he's simply screwed up, to crawl through the thorns his own indifference has sown, and to confront everything his own flawed parenting has caused. It's clear that the man who served Baoxian's dinner last night is not the same character Shen Yuan has read about, and he's not sure if he's ever been just the preconceived ideas Shen Yuan has created about him.

Shen Yuan is confident that if Luo Binghe wants to make a change, he will. Not because he's read about it, or because he's associated it with his character, but because… well. He's shown it. He's been showing it. Luo Binghe, as human as he is, can face guilt, accept his mistakes, and change.

Luo Binghe smiles, and it's a small smile, but it feels like it's huge.

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

Even though Shen Yuan still feels a residual ache in his muscles, as if his body hasn't decided whether he's just tired or truly injured, Shen Yuan feels *quite a bit* better. Much better than he did a day ago, of course, which is already a win. He doesn't have a cough, his throat doesn't burn, he can breathe through his nose, and his pain is at a low level. Even his swollen muscles seem to have recovered after the fever knocked him down for almost a full day. Either way, he's much better. He'll take that as a victory.

After sharing a light and rather leisurely breakfast with Luo Binghe, and just after he'd left to sort out all those neglected responsibilities, Shen Yuan realizes that he actually… doesn't have much to do in the palace after all. He's not going to risk going to the inner harem area, even if his health is better; he's already tried his luck twice, and he doesn't want to see if the third time's the charm.

Even though he already has a few bestiaries to read, he's not sure he can fully concentrate. He feels as if his energy is scattered, nervous, as if his ability to just sit and be is nonexistent. Besides, sitting and being would mean *being alone with his thoughts,* which Shen Yuan realizes isn't a pleasant thing on a good day, especially these days.

He has too many things that he is consciously avoiding thinking about.

…even if maybe he *should*.

So, armed only with his cane and his therapy homework notebook, he lets himself be carried by the fresh air to the inner garden. It's a rather beautiful, artificial day, and certainly mild, and Shen Yuan pokes around a bit among the neatly trimmed bushes with young, blue-edged leaves bearing small berries (a powerful kind of plant bezoar; not poisonous, just disgustingly bitter) some pretty flowers with medicinal properties (a rather curious choice, really? Some look like they've been recently transplanted, because even if Shen Yuan doesn't know *much* about gardening, it's clear that the soil around their roots is a bit softer than the rest...), until he comes across some small sprouts. They are little, blackened spikes, and it takes Shen Yuan a long moment to notice that Luo Binghe's gardeners might be trying to get some bamboo to sprout next to a small pool of clear water.

It is only when the smell of cigarette smoke hits him that Shen Yuan realizes he is not in fact alone in the gardens.

A little further on, almost completely hidden among the bushes, Shen Jiu looks… miserable. He doesn't seem to have slept at all. He's no longer wearing his suit jacket, and his trousers are completely wrinkled, as if he'd slept in them. His shirt sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, and the way he's sitting with his elbows on his knees is so strangely normal that Shen Yuan hesitates to interrupt him. However, when another puff of gray smoke reaches him and a cough inevitably becomes apparent, Shen Jiu looks up, fear obvious in his eyes.

The shock is revealed with clear relief as he puts out his cigarette on the ground.

"Hey," Shen Yuan greets, unsure exactly how to approach him. It's impossible to ignore, even for him, that… his brother doesn't seem to be doing too well. "It's okay, don't worry. I'm not going to rat you out for polluting the gardens or anything. In fact, I think there's an opium pipe somewhere in the corner of my room…? Do you think we can take some and get high?"

“Funny,” Shen Jiu mutters in a sullen tone that clearly seems to not find anything Shen Yuan just said funny.

Shen Yuan takes slow steps forward. It's strange; he feels a heaviness in his stomach, almost of guilt, as if he's done something desperately wrong. Even if he wants to defend his choice, it's true that Shen Jiu *had* been right. He had been careless. But how else could he keep up with them?

Shen Yuan had never been able to keep up with them. That's why he'd walked away. Until walking away wasn't an option, he supposes. Walking away from his own son will never be an option.

Shen Jiu doesn't say anything else. His gaze wanders out into the garden, his expression almost defeated. He looks exhausted, pale, the green of the garden making his face look even more miserable. His leg trembles anxiously, but he doesn't even seem to notice, his gaze slightly lost in an expression that could almost be disoriented.

They stand there in a tense, harsh silence that almost hurts. Shen Yuan takes a deep breath before resigning himself.

Okay. *Okay.* This isn't about Shen Yuan right now, and he can't keep ignoring the damn elephant in the room. They're going to talk about it.

“What’s wrong?” he asks. Shen Jiu looks at him so coldly he might as well have punched him. “Hey, I don’t mean to ask this. Look, I know this is all a shock, okay? Another world, a palace, magic swords, demons, strange beasts, and well, Luo Binghe being… you know. It’s a lot, I know, and it’s normal to freak out. It’s okay if you’re, uh, afraid.”

Contrary to what he might imagine – or, in reality, not so far from what he know of his brother, Shen Jiu lets out a small, bitter laugh.

“Afraid?” he repeats. His gaze drops to his own hands, moving his fingers in the air as if he needs to see something to focus. “I’m scared to death.”

Shen Yuan opens his mouth to say something that sounds even remotely reassuring or empathetic, but before even a second passes, Shen Jiu continues in a low voice:

“I’ve been here before.”

“What?” is the only thing that escapes Shen Yuan, a croak. Shen Jiu doesn’t look up from his hands, his expression disoriented, his face pale. “What do you mean?”

Shen Jiu shrugs; it's an almost awkward, slightly distant movement. In a whisper, he replies: "Before. In my nightmares."

Shen Jiu doesn't seem to be looking at either his hands or the garden; in fact, the more Shen Yuan looks at him, the more he can notice how much he doesn't even seem to be really *looking*. His eyes are fixed but lost, absorbed in things that probably aren’t even there.

“*Nightmares*,” Shen Yuan repeats, trying his best to understand. Shen Jiu had always had nightmares; hell, he almost missed a year of school because of it. He had a pretty rough time as a teenager. But nightmares *from the palace*? How does that even make sense…?

“Yes,” Shen Jiu replies, oblivious to his ramblings. “I know where I am. These gardens. The study, the library. I was never here in the nightmares, *of course*,” and the twist on Shen Jiu’s mouth is sullen. “But in those nightmares, I could picture it. Like a dream within a dream, as if *he* were implanted in my head. I would see it, and *he*… ” and Shen Jiu presses his lips together coldly. “He was gloating. About everything he had. Everything that belonged to him. That no matter how much I had humiliated him, how much he had suffered, now he had it *all.”*

Shen Yuan looks at his brother's face as if he were seeing him for the first time.

“Oh,” is all he can say, with a feeling of vertigo and a pain settling in his stomach. It feels like sinking the puzzle piece that makes the whole picture fit together. “*Oh*.”

“Yes,” Shen Jiu repeats, and barks out a humorless laugh. He almost seems to tremble. “I remember the pain, you know. It hurts. When I started remembering, *God*. It *still* hurts, sometimes.” And his laugh twists, humorlessly, like a wail. Shen Yuan watches him look at his arms, move his hands, and then *he understands.* It’s a painful, sharp, horrifying realization that tugs at his stomach like a hook, making him feel sick.

It wasn't that his brother was staring at his hands to concentrate. In fact, Shen Jiu seemed to be staring at his hands, his arms, the skin of his exposed arms, *to see* that they were actually *still there,* stuck to his body.

Shen Yuan forces himself to take a deep breath, extremely sure that *he's not going* to deal with his own hysterical attack right now.

“I thought,” Shen Jiu continues, his expression blank, “that they were just nightmares. No details. Just pain. No two nightmares were the same, and I couldn’t even remember… specific things. I didn’t remember his face. I didn’t remember his voice. Then he just appeared, and it was like the damn nightmare had come out of my dream to haunt me. It couldn’t be real. It *shouldn’t* be real. It can’t… it can’t be real.”

Shen Jiu runs his hands through his hair. His hands are shaking, his breathing is almost spasmodic as he takes a sharp inhalation. His shoulders are trembling.

“But it is,” is all Shen Yuan can say, even as his own words seem to scrape like stones against his throat. “It’s… all real.”

Shen Jiu doesn't react at first. He raises his eyes slightly, staring at Shen Yuan with furrowed brows, a gaze so sunken and lost it's almost pitiful. He stands there, as if he can't even recognize him, as if each of the memories disguised as nightmares hits him so hard that it demolishes the foundations of his new life.

And when they are demolished, they collapse.

Shen Yuan sees it crumbling as something inevitable. A storm too strong against fragile walls, the tempest sweeping away the walls, the entire house. Shen Jiu begins to breathe raggedly, the tremors in his body worsening, his breathing shallow and labored. His irises tremble in his bloodshot, overly bright eyes, and though he seems to take erratic breaths, none of them seem deep enough, trembling as if he were being shaken by the fierce wind of the catastrophe itself unleashing within him.

Shen Yuan reacts before thinking: he leans forward, pushing away the hands clawing too hard at his own scalp. Shen Jiu doesn't resist, tears streaming down his face as if he can't even stem or control them, his shaky breaths sapping him of oxygen more than he can help. Shen Yuan holds on tightly, holding his brother so tightly that he can feel the erratic pulse and the tremors shake them both.

“Hey, hey,” he murmurs, the hysterical note in his own voice sounding distant. His own voice seems to float far above them. “Breathe. With me. It’s okay. Everything is okay now. You’re with me, you’re safe. Hold on to me. Everything is okay. You’re safe, I promise. Just breathe.”

Shen Jiu lets out an almost agonized sound, a sob that breaks, high and distant, and Shen Yuan makes sure to squeeze him tighter. Something physical. Something he can feel about the mess that's consuming him. He tightens his arms around him, his hands balling into tight fists, tapping little taps against his back. Two, pause, two, pause.

It feels like an eternity since he had to learn that, back when Shen Jiu couldn't even calm himself. When he woke up lost, disoriented, with no idea where he was or, sometimes, even recognizing any of his own family amidst the terror, the sheer dread.

Time stretches on, thick, harsh. Shen Jiu lets out two, three, five more pitiful sobs, but gradually seems to stabilize. Shen Yuan continues, still, small tap-taps mimicking a heartbeat, taps that linger on his back until his breathing returns to normal. Brief spasms continue to shake him when Shen Yuan moves away a little, trying to identify something in his face—

Shen Jiu looks more miserable than he's seen him in a long, long time. His mouth is bitten so hard that the line of his teeth has been drawn above his lower lip. His eyes and nose are a red, swollen affair, and his gaze still doesn't look clear or entirely intelligent, as if even after calming down a bit, his mind is still too far away.

“Hey,” Shen Yuan rubs his arms, squeezes his shoulders. Shen Jiu seems to react only a little, with a flinch, his eyes following his hands rubbing against his arms, his fingers digging in a way that should probably be at least a little painful against his stiff muscles. Even if it probably hurts, *it seems* to work, because Shen Jiu looks at his hands, then at his face, then at his hands, and then something about his face looks… more alive. “You’re safe. Okay? You’re safe.”

Still, it takes a little longer to get a verbal response out of him. It's probably the longest panic attack Shen Jiu has had in *years.*

When he finally speaks, his voice is broken: “I lost you, once. In nightmares.”

Shen Yuan raises an eyebrow. “Me?” he asks, just to urge him to talk more. Shen Jiu nods slowly.

“You were with us. We were sold,” he says, his voice hollow. He seems to be struggling with something distant, eyes shifting in and out of focus between dreams and realities. “You fell ill, suddenly. We hid it, because otherwise they’d leave you behind— weakness had no worth. The slavers…” His expression is devastated. Shen Yuan tries to follow him, to understand, *to comprehend,* but none of it sounds like anything he would know or recognize. “One night, you got better. We thought that would be it. That you would be better and survive the illness after all. It was the best night in a long time. You told stories for everyone, about stars, about gods and heroes. And you didn’t wake up the next morning.”

Shen Yuan chokes on a breath.

“Losing you once was enough,” his brother says, his voice raspy and full of so much that Shen Yuan has to force himself to take a deep breath and hold back the tears. *No.* No. “I remember. Nothing was a dream. I died. *He…* ” and his face twists again in horror. “It’s… everything repeats itself. I don’t know how to explain it. When it’s over, it repeats itself. And when I see his face, *I know* who he is, I know what he’ll do to me. I know *what* he’ll do. I can’t stop myself from doing the things I did. I can’t stop hurting him when I know it’ll get worse. Every blow I strike, he’s going to strike back worse. But I can’t *stop*,” and Shen Jiu stifles another whimper. Shen Yuan clenches his elbows, his hands shaking so much he’s not sure which of them is shaking more. “So, I want to resist. I want to say no. I won’t repeat that torture again. Once, twice now? It’s enough. *I’m so tired,* and…” and Shen Jiu’s eyes close. Tears stream down his face, his mouth trembling before he says, “And I die. And I leave that life behind. And I’m here. I made it out. Nothing was real. But it always was.”

His brother is pale as a ghost. Shen Yuan is sure he's no better off.

When he manages to speak, all he can say is: “I’m sorry.”

Shen Jiu opens his eyes. He seems to have come back a little more to his senses.

“What nonsense are you talking about?” he hisses.

“It’s my fault you’re here,” Shen Yuan says, grimacing. The words tumble out, almost uncontrollably. “I’m sorry. I literally brought you to the place of your nightmares. God, you have so many reasons to be mad at me. I’m sorry.”

Shen Jiu clicks his tongue. It's such a normal sound, so like him, that Shen Yuan has to fight back the lump of tears in his throat. Ugh. *Ugh.* This isn't where he expected the conversation to go at all. He's not entirely sure *he wants to* actively process any of what's happening.

Not now, at least.

After a silence, Shen Jiu simply says, “Aren’t you going to question what I just told you?” he asks. There’s a hint of bitter humor there, and Shen Yuan snorts, rolling his eyes.

“Oh, I would, but my new experience with half-demon kids and swords that make portals between worlds isn’t helping,” Shen Yuan replies, his tone probably bordering on hysteria. “If I’m going to freak out about this, I’d rather it be in my bed where I’ll at least have a pillow to scream into.”

Now, the laughter that nearly broke Shen Jiu's heart sounds a little more alive. It curves his mouth and spasms in his body, as if it were bursting forth from him involuntarily. Shen Yuan forces himself to take a deep breath, gripping Shen Jiu's elbows and forearms tightly, reminding him that they are stuck to his body, forcing himself not to imagine, not to *remember*, *not to see.*

He won't be dealing with any of that now.

Not *now*.

And he's not sure he wants to do it anytime soon.

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

Shen Yuan is adept at pretending there’s nothing to worry about — probably a skill he learned from Shen Jiu himself as a child. After recovering from his minor emotional breakdown, Shen Jiu returns to the gardens with his face washed, his hair damp and slicked back, and a thermometer he uses to check that Shen Yuan is *really* okay.

His temperature is normal. He just feels a bit tired, so for lack of anything more entertaining to do, Shen Yuan settles down with his bestiaries under the shade of a tree whose tender blue leaves fade to gray as they fall onto the trimmed lawn. Where the soil has begun to rob them of their nutrients, stretches of grass have turned a pleasing mint blue.

Shen Jiu becomes like a caged lion after a while. He’s not that interested in bestiaries, dislikes walking in the garden, finds no books he likes in Shen Yuan’s room, there are no books that interest him in the room assigned to Shen Yuan, he doesn't want to show Shen Yuan how to use a sword by sparring with some servant for a show, and it seems his cell phone ran out of battery hours ago.

“Why were you using it anyway?” Shen Yuan complains. “It’s not like there’s a signal here.”

Shen Jiu shrugs. “I looked at photos to remind myself that I didn’t go crazy.”

“Makes sense to me,” Shen Yuan sighs, feeling a little bad for not being able to offer him some pics for his peace of mind. He’d left the gift albums for Mingyan and Sha Hualing, so he doesn’t have much else to help.

Just as Shen Jiu is starting to get on his nerves and is on his third cigar across the garden, Shen Yuan calls for some servants. He gets a small table set up in the gardens with a weiqi board on it, and then drags his brother out to play.

Shen Jiu destroys him for four consecutive games before Shen Yuan accepts that he doesn't even remember how to play, so his wins over his strategies are actually ridiculous wins over

someone who doesn't remember how to play, causing Shen Jiu to spend the next hour and a half alternating between insulting him for being ridiculous and teaching him how to play properly.

Servants bring them refreshments: lots of chopped fruit, fruity drinks, nut crackers. Shen Jiu looks a bit irritated at first at being surrounded by so many strange-looking demons, but they don't stay long, only coming back every now and then with more fruit, colorful flowery drinks that Shen Yuan recognizes as safe and even medicinal, and after a long while even Shen Jiu seems less tense whenever a servant brings them something as they start bringing flower petals sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon, and a few other things that Shen Jiu likes.

By the time lunch rolls around, Shen Yuan has grown bored of losing weiqi over and over again. Luckily, Zi-Zhao comes to pick them up, and in the dining hall, Chengle, Anhe, and Shaoshao are waiting, along with a rather grumpy Sha Hualing. She ambushes him on his way to the table, dragging him by the arm into the hallway to snap, "You were plotting against that bitch Xiao Gongzhu's life. And without me? You dare leave me out, human?"

"I didn't plot against anyone's life," Shen Yuan says quickly. "Doctor Mu mentioned something, and I just don't remember what it was. Oh, I was very feverish, and I barely remember anything…"

Sha Hualing rolls her eyes and bares her teeth in a clear threat. Shen Yuan has no doubt that she could bite him if she wanted to, so he simply snorts.

"I promise you, if I want to plot against her, I'll tell you. I wouldn't trust anyone but you to come up with some fantastic plan of revenge against her," he says, and Sha Hualing seems only slightly more appeased.

The lunch is clearly not Luo Binghe's own creation; however, the food seems to have been made according to specific recipes, because the servants serve Shen Yuan dishes that are milder and lighter, making them easy to eat. It's only halfway through the meal that a small head peeks out.

"Xian-mei," Anhe says, a little surprised. The girl hides a little behind the door frame, her big eyes a little scared. "Are you going to have lunch with us?"

The girl hesitates, but nods. In a small voice, she says, "Father Emperor came to find me. Personally. So I can eat with you."

"Great," Anhe says, giving her a small smile. The little girl approaches with small steps, and it is Shen Jiu who stands up to give up his seat next to Shen Yuan, who looks at the little girl with a fond smile. She is wearing large, ornate accessories again, a pile of hairpins with red crystal flowers, and her silks are at least five different layers that make her look like a giant flower bud. Shen Yuan hands her plates and bowls for her to serve herself, and after looking around at everyone at the table, Baoxian takes a breath as if to summon courage and begins to fill her plate with dumplings, chicken pieces with spring onions and meat, as well as a generous portion of rice.

“Eat this,” Shen Jiu said, giving her a few roasted vegetables from his own plate. “They’re necessary. And these… aren’t that badly cooked.”

“These!” says Chengle, who has no shame in being a complete spoiled and sitting on Shen Yuan’s lap to eat it once Shen Yuan didn’t protest the first time he did. Shen Yuan has him hugged to keep him still, but even so, his sweet boy keeps moving around. “These are *delicious*. Zi-Zhao made them herself! She’s a great cook, not as great as Father Emperor, but still really good! The food from her town is delicious! They have fruits and mushrooms and they make them very delicious!”

What Chengle puts on her sister's plate are some chunks of meat stuffed with some fruit and mushrooms, and a strange mushroom soup that doesn't look bad. Shen Yuan hasn't tried it, unsure if it will agree with his stomach, but he gives it the good point that it looks appetizing. Baoxian accepts everything on her plate, even when Sha Hualing gives her a crooked smile and holds out a honey chicken skewer, and the girl eats and eats, growing hungrier with each bite, her smile blooming ever wider as she continues to eat more peacefully.

“Baba, Baba,” Chengle tugs at Shen Yuan sleeves, as if he needs it to get his attention. In fact, he has the boy sitting on his lap! He doesn’t need to do anything to get his attention! “We have to take An-ge out for sushi. He’ll love it! He likes fish more than meat. And Shaoshao, a ball pit! As long as she doesn’t bite anything or anyone, it’ll be great!”

“Perhaps, in the future.” Shen Yuan makes no promises, certainly not without discussing them with Sha Hualing. When he makes eye contact with her, she just smiles at him with that clearly amused crooked grin, so Shen Yuan just sighs. “When they visit us again, we can.”

“Yes!” Chengle continues talking to his An-ge, clearly excited about all the things they might see. He wants to take them to see Totoro and his dinosaur books, and Shen Yuan does a bit of interceding to include Baoxian in the conversation when she starts to get curious about dinosaurs. Shen Yuan doesn’t feel physically ready to take a bunch of wild kids to the Paleozoological Museum, but he figures if he just takes Airplane and Binghe along to keep up, it won’t be so bad.

Besides, he supposes it wouldn't hurt to include Baoxian on the visit. It would be rude to leave her out when she's shown such interest in dinosaurs.

Sha Hualing asks about dinosaurs only once and seems so personally disappointed that she can't hunt one because they're all extinct. Shen Yuan decides, for the sake of humanity, to never show her any of the Jurassic Park movies, even though it might be fun to show her Godzilla.

After the meal, the children are naturally led off to do quiet business in the garden while they wait for their food to go down; Anhe has no problem sitting down to read, and Baoxian seems to struggle with her robes so she can sit next to him without them getting too wrinkled. Shen Yuan relaxes under a shade; Chengle has retrieved all his stuffed tigers, but is instructing two of them.

“And you won’t let Shaoshao bite you!” Chengle tells him. Shen Yuan leans over, curious. The two animated stuffed tigers are comfortably looking up at him, paying attention in a way

that’s almost intelligent, and extremely adorable. “And you’ll take all your baths. No getting on the bed dirty. Baba doesn’t like it, and Lingling won’t like it either. Don’t be rude or disobedient.”

“Chengle, darling,” Shen Yuan says, unable to control his curiosity. His sweet son turns to look at him with a wide smile. “What are you doing?”

“Lazy and Autumn are going to stay with An-ge and Shao-mei,” says his boy, puffing himself up like a boastful peacock. Shen Yuan can’t help but grin. “That way they’ll be taken care of. That’s a promise, Baba! That way I promise I won’t be gone forever. And I promise I’ll see them again, and we’ll play together again. And they won’t worry. And they know I’ll be back.”

“But aren’t you the cutest boy in the world?” is all Shen Yuan can say. He extends his arm, and his boy, his smart, cute boy, runs up to receive a big hug.

Shen Jiu has gone into seclusion in the room again. Shen Yuan is a little worried about him, but when Mu Qingfang appears a little later with another pot of bitter medicinal tea, Shen Jiu is with him—in his words, overseeing that he is doing things properly with Shen Yuan’s medicines. Shen Yuan doesn’t want to dare imagine the truth, but he believes that even if Shen Jiu doesn’t say it out loud, he doesn’t want to think too much about it either.

The tea is bitter and leaves him somewhat stunned, a little dizzy. It's a slightly stronger dose, and Zi-Zhao rushes to bring him a pillow so his neck doesn't get stiff. Honestly, how much will Luo Binghe pay her? Can't he hire her?

…he should probably take his temperature again if he keeps thinking things at this level of delirium. He doesn’t get around to it, nor does he even have time to hesitate, because he falls asleep, and when he wakes up a long time later—fortunately without as much muscle stiffness—it's because Chengle has climbed on him for a hug.

“Huh?” Still a little sleepy, he notices his boy's disheveled hair and beaming smile. He doesn't take long to wake up, relieved to have less tension in his muscles. “Oh, did you have a nice afternoon?”

“Yes, yes!” and Chengle has the most radiant smile. Shen Yuan pinches his rosy cheeks a little, and his sweet boy squirms, laughing. “An-ge fell into the water. Jiu-ge pulled him out, and they both almost fell in. Shaoshao tried to bite me! But Lingling bit her cheek first, and Shaoshao cried because she couldn’t bite me, and her mother hunt her and she lost. And Xian-jie cried a little because she wanted to play with the tigers too, but her dress tore, and she was afraid her mother would scold her, but An-ge gave it a few stitches, and that's it!”

Shen Yuan laughs a little.

“Wow,” he hums. “Sounds like a very fun afternoon.”

He feels a little bad about missing it, but he's sure it only serves as an incentive for more afternoons like this, with his son and his siblings playing together, having fun. It doesn't

sound bad that they have time together. It doesn't sound bad that Chengle is with the family that loves him.

“Father Emperor says it’s time to go. Mom already said goodbye, and Lingling took her away, so we can’t have tea,” Chengle protests, and only then does his boy look a little sadder about having to leave the palace and his siblings, unlike in the morning, when the prospect seemed to make him brighten. “But they’ll come visit us when we have the new apartment! And we’ll visit them again. Right?”

“Sure, baby,” Shen Yuan places a small kiss on his boy’s forehead, hugging him close. “Whenever you want, and whenever your father can bring us, or bring them home. Remember, that sword of his requires a lot of him,” he says. His boy doesn’t pout or protest; in fact, he looks much more confident now, nodding his head.

“Lingling didn’t want Mom to see me off when we leave,” Chengle says, almost nervously fiddling with his sleeves. “She didn’t want Mom to be really, really sad if she sees me leave. But I’m not leaving forever. Will Mom still be sad if I leave even if it's not for that long?”

Shen Yuan sighs. He brushes the boy's hair between his fingers. “My love, it's not your responsibility that your mom is sad,” he reminds him in a gentle voice. “It's not your responsibility to make her happy either. Besides, your mom and I agree that even if she's in some rough moment, the healthiest thing for you is to be home with me, where I can take care of you. She wants to see you happy, and she knows you're happy with me.”

That was true. Even if they hadn't spoken about it explicitly, it was clear that Liu Mingyan hadn't made any move to insist that Chengle stay. Shen Yuan guessed that… it was fine. It wasn't as if the poor woman could handle more than her own soul right now.

Chengle lets out a somewhat sad sigh, but his sweet boy is strong and brave, so he only seeks more hugs to comfort his little heart full of emotions. Shen Yuan holds him a little tighter before his boy pulls away, and Shen Yuan performs the awkward ritual of slowly stretching his muscles to try to stand up.

“Dumb,” he hears Shen Jiu’s voice before his brother helps him, perhaps a little more roughly than appropriate, to his feet. “Sleep on the floor, sitting up? I’ll make appointments with a physiotherapist and a massage therapist for you as soon as we return.”

“Jiu-ge,” Chengle protested. “Don’t call Baba Yuan a dumb! He’s the best.”

“The best dumb one” Shen Jiu continues complaining.

Shen Yuan doesn't comment on how hasty Shen Jiu seems to be to leave. He feels it would be too cruel to make fun of it, so he accepts his help, brushes off his clothes a bit, and heads back. Chengle continues talking about little adventures they've had that afternoon, and Shen Jiu even smiles a little when Chengle talks about making sword shapes with Anhe. Although Anhe does fall into the pond afterwards, that was entirely his fault!

The imperial chambers seem to have some kind of small sitting room that Shen Yuan hasn't seen before. On the long table, the servants seem to have packed everything into different

qiankun bags. There's also a wooden box with more medical supplies. Most importantly for Chengle, all the tigers with their talismans are sitting in order, some yawning, others just sitting still, and even the Dawang Tiger, who has clearly seen *better* days judging by how dirty its paws are, just sits there, lazily.

There are two fewer tigers. Shen Yuan doesn't allow his son's enormous heart to make his own heart ache.

Even if Mingyan isn't there —for obvious reasons, Shen Yuan assumes, watching his brother anxiously tap his foot—, Sha Hualing and her children are. She squeezes Chengle tightly in her arms, murmurs things into his head, and pinches his cheeks. The boy squirms, trying to bite her, and she even seems to let him bite her, with a hiss as if Chengle might really have hunted her. His sweet boy beams with victory, and turns to look at Shen Yuan with wide eyes, full of excitement and triumph.

Anhe gives Chengle a big hug. He promises to take care of Lazy and Autumn, prevent Shaoshao from biting any of the tigers, and make sure Yaozuo isn't cruel to Baoxian or Fuliang. Otherwise, he'll stick needles in all his nerve points, making him stiff like the Feathered Possum-Snakes faking their own deaths.

And A-Shao, of course, bites Chengle. Shen Yuan thinks Chengle has let her do it this time, because he squeezes his sister in a tight hug that makes Shen Yuan feel his own breathing strange, imagining that someday, maybe in the future, Chengle can be as good a brother to Chenxue as he is to Shaoshao or Baoxian, with a huge heart willing to make amends with just a little kindness, even from those who have been cruel in the past.

Anhe and Shaoshao hug him, too. Shen Yuan has to dole out hugs, dodge bites, pats on the head, and more hugs to get the two children to let him go.

When Luo Binghe appears to carry the luggage in his sleeves, he looks exhausted, is carrying Xin Mo, and looks as if he could use a good night's rest. Luckily, Shen Yuan surmises, he doesn't look as if he's going to have a qi deviation. He's sure his own brother is the most prone to qi deviation, though, even if he doesn't have meridians or anything.

As soon as Luo Binghe says goodbye to the children in a way that feels rather awkward –like neither of them knows exactly how to say goodbye or how to be comfortably affectionate with each other– and Shen Yuan tries not to dwell on it too much, much less on how Sha Hualing pulls him along to hiss something that sounds like a threat in his ear making Luo Binghe laugh at her, the portal he opens with Xin Mo makes Shen Yuan break out in a cold sweat and he has to hold on to the cane with both hands. He's still dressed in his ridiculous xianxia clothes, but Chengle is too, so he figures they'll be able to change when they arrive–

Anyway, Shen Jiu is the first to step through the portal, almost pushing Luo Binghe aside in his desperation to flee. If Shen Yuan hadn't spoken to him that morning, he would have found it funny. Chengle sends the tigers running and leaping through it, and with one last glance at Sha Hualing, who has a slightly furrowed brow and an expression that looks *almost* worried but immediately changes to a playful smile when Shen Yuan makes eye contact with her, Shen Yuan takes Chengle's hand tightly and they both step through the portal.

He staggers to the other side, stomach churning and sweating coldly, unable to get air properly circulating in his lungs; he takes painful gasps, but can't let it out. Shen Jiu immediately stops rummaging through his desk when Shen Yuan feels himself on the verge of fainting, trembling, dark spots crashing across his vision and a wave of nausea so strong in his throat that for a second, he's sure he'll throw up his entire lunch. He can hear Chengle shrieking, scared, and on the verge of fainting, all he can feel is guilt. Will he ever stop worrying his son?

The portal twists in the air, crackling ominously, as if it were a living thing feeding on his suffering, and Shen Yuan takes deep breaths of the intoxicated air until Shen Jiu throws the window open with a force so hard it might as well have broken the glass, pulling Shen Yuan closer to the window. The icy January air in Beijing hits his face, and even with the smog of the winter city, it feels like he's breathing pure ice.

Still, Shen Yuan gasps, shaking to the bone, unable to draw normal breaths. He's sure oxygen isn't reaching his brain. Chengle moves closer, pulling the blanket off the bed and pushing it over Shen Yuan as he struggles to breathe deeply. The air remains stale, the portal is open, and it's Shen Jiu who practically drags him into the hallway.

"Open the windows," Shen Yuan hears him bark. He can hear a screech he easily recognizes as Airplane, and people moving at full speed. Shen Yuan doesn't even want to imagine his own face. "Open the windows, damn it!"

"Xiao Ji-…?"

"Oh, fuck! The windows, Qi-ge?!"

"What's going on?!"

"Baba Yuan!" and his little boy never lets go of his hand; his voice, his little hand, his frightened eyes—that's all Shen Yuan can focus on. He's not sure if it's his brother or Airplane holding the inhaler to his mouth, and even with one dose, his body doesn't seem to be getting enough oxygen. Why the hell…?

And then: "Get *that* away from his face!"

"No, no! Wait!" and it's Airplane's voice, and right after:

"Mobei-bofu!"

Shen Yuan feels icy air hitting him directly in the face. It's not coming from any window, and when he's able to regain control of his vision and see something other than Chengle's frightened little face, he finds himself facing a portal made of shadows pushing a blizzard of icy air directly into his face. The air cuts against his cheeks and his teeth chatter, but a couple of breaths later, the combination of everything has probably allowed Shen Yuan to normalize his breathing properly. He feels like the tears of despair have literally, not metaphorically, frozen against his eyelashes.

The portal Mobei Jun has created in front of his face vanishes. Shen Yuan draws in a breath that he can hold and exhale without feeling like it's stuck against his chest, stabbing him, and only then does he notice that, pale as death, Yue Qi is actually standing a little further away, his expression almost distraught and horrified.

Ah. *Oops*.

His breathing feels painful, and he's sure his chest is wheezing. Shen Yuan sweeps the room —messy, a bad kung fu movie on TV, a table full of half-eaten desserts and two glasses of iced coffee—just getting familiar with something comfortable, safe, cozy, *his own.* Even the mess feels so normal, he could lie down on the carpet and cry.

“Bro, what the fuck,” Airplane hisses, flopping down beside him. Chengle has at some point taken refuge under the blanket, and Shen Yuan still feels his chest heavily with every breath. Then Airplane looks him up and down, lingering on the bandage on his wrist visible above Chengle’s tiny head, and repeats, “What the fuck.”

Shen Yuan makes sure he can breathe normally a few times before hissing with what little air he has left, “Can’t I have an asthma attack in peace in this house?”

His brother lets out a frustrated howl. Shen Yuan pretends not to hear things that sound like shoving swords up someone's ass. He doesn’t need *that* image in his mind, thanks.

“Is Baba feeling better?” Chengle asks, his big eyes worried. Shen Yuan hugs his sweet boy as tightly as he can, which certainly isn’t much right now.

“A little bit,” he agrees. “I’ll be fine. It was probably the change of air.”

“*Sure*,” hisses Shen Jiu, who now seems to be searching like crazy through the drawers of every piece of furniture Shen Yuan owns in his house. A step behind him, Yue Qi looks like a ghost, holding out a hand with a grimace across his mouth, as if something is stopping him from saying anything. Shen Yuan has no idea what Shen Jiu is supposedly missing until his brother lets out a frustrated groan and says, “For the love of God, where do you keep your fucking phone charger!?”

“Oh,” and Airplane flinches, standing up. “Oh, sorry, sorry! I was using it… I left it here…”

Airplane runs into the kitchen. Mobei Jun follows exactly three steps behind him, like a damn private security guard. He only throws an *almost* worried glance in Shen Yuan's direction before disappearing through the kitchen door.

Finally, Yue Qi finally seems to gather the courage to say: “Xiao Jiu-…”

“*What?!*” Shen Jiu turns around, raising his voice so loudly that even Shen Yuan is startled. So does Chengle, burrowing further under the blanket, his big eyes flashing with concern. “What the hell do you want!? My phone. Is. Dead! Do you know how many calls I must’ve missed? I had an *important meeting* today with the lawyer to go over our damn case! Do you think I can explain myself to you right now…!?”

“You don’t need to explain,” Yue Qi says. There’s a strange peace on his face, something that seems to have swept away the fear. “Shang-di told me everything. It was either that or he’d let me file a missing person report with the police.”

Shen Jiu’s mouth twists; from what he knows of his brother, Shen Yuan knows he’s holding back a smile. With what seems like biting humor, he hisses, “And you *believed* him?”

Still with that strangely peaceful expression, Yue Qi replies, “Of course. I didn’t expect you to remember, after all, but-…”

Something seems to distort on Shen Jiu's face. From where Shen Yuan watches, his own breathing is still wheezing. He’s too weak to stand on his own, and all he can rush to do is cover Chengle's ears with his hands. His boy looks up, worried, but Shen Yuan *knows* that expression on his brother's face all too well. Pale, livid, as if he's been slapped, humiliated, and insulted his mother all at the same time. He's seen it before, and he grits his teeth, mentally preparing himself for the exact moment when he—

“Did *you know*?!” And it’s not that Shen Jiu is shouting. In fact, Shen Yuan finds it *almost* worse. If he shouts, there might be a point where he goes down. The way his words tumble out of him, almost torn out, as if he’s been punched too hard and has to spit out blood—somehow worse than if he shouted. With shouts, he can go down. With a hiss like that of a wounded animal, it can only go *up*. “DID YOU *KNOW*?!”

Yue Qi seems to notice exactly how badly he's screwed up, because he takes a step back. This only seems to push Shen Jiu's buttons further, and he takes a step forward, then two, three, his trembling hands gripping Yue Qi's shirt so tightly that he can almost tear the fabric beneath his fingers.

“You *know it*!?” Shen Jiu demands again. Shen Yuan can no longer see his expression, but judging by Yue Qi’s expression, his pale face and look of horror, Shen Jiu seems to have understood on his own without any verbal response, so the next thing that comes out of his mouth is a harsh: “Since when!?”

Yue Qi opens and closes his mouth a few times without saying anything. A moment later, in barely a whisper, he says, “…my whole life.”

The sound that comes from Shen Jiu is an almost animal-like shriek. Chengle tenses, wanting to turn his face to see, his eyes filling with frightened tears, so Shen Yuan, barely able to breathe on his own to dare intervene, does the only thing he can: covers them both under the blanket. Chengle clings to him so tightly it hurts, and Shen Yuan covers his ears again as Shen Jiu, in the most hysterical tone Shen Yuan has ever heard him use, begins:

“Your *WHOLE* life? You knew this *whole* damn life, and you didn’t think *to tell me anything*!? What the hell is wrong with your head? Do you even have a brain!? You knew this whole *damn time,* you absolute-…! You *knew*! You knew what the truth was when I was telling you those shitty dreams and you shut your mouth! What the fuck is wrong with you?!”

“Xiao Jiu-…”

“And you have the *fucking nerve, you absolute motherfucker,* to call me that!? Fuck you! Oh, for fuck’s sake! For so many years I thought I was *crazy,* and you knew the *fucking truth,* and you kept it to yourself! You kept it to yourself even when I was telling you everything and you just played dumb the whole time! Why did you think letting me believe I was *crazy* was any better? Why!?”

Shen Yuan has no idea what Chengle hears; his little face is barely visible under the blanket, but the boy is snuggled up against his chest. Shen Yuan tries to hum something, anything that isn't just wheezing and a hoarse, exhausted voice, and he's almost certain that Yue Qi still won't respond when, a long moment later, he simply says:

"… I'm sorry."

“OH, *FUCK YOU*!”

And a moment later, with the hardest slam Shen Jiu has ever made in his apartment, he walks away.

Shen Yuan waits the obligatory thirty seconds before emerging from under the blanket. Chengle's pout is shaky, his brows furrowed, and Shen Yuan is sure it will probably be a while before Chengle can be anywhere with Jiu-ge without feeling some tension. He supposes he'll need to sit his dumbass brother down with Chengle so he can explain himself and apologize for behaving like that around him… no matter how justified his reaction is.

Yue Qi looks like a beaten dog. Even though Shen Yuan didn't hear any slapping, he seems to have been literally whipped, his face pale and his shirt wrinkled where Shen Jiu had clung to him, almost shaking him. He looks utterly lost, and when he makes eye contact with Shen Yuan, only then does he seem to wake up from some kind of strange stupor. He turns and goes to the door, having the courtesy not to slam it this time. In truth, his neighbors are probably planning his spontaneous death under suspicious circumstances at this point…

Airplane stands in the kitchen doorway, pale as if he's seen more than one ghost, holding a charging cable. All he says is: "Bro. Sometimes your whole family scares me."

With his breathing still slightly wheezing, all Shen Yuan can say is: “…me too.”

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Once Luo Binghe finally steps through the portal, it feels as if a bomb has exploded in the apartment. It's impossible to deny the strange tension that hangs in the air. His gaze wanders before he asks, his voice strained:

“…something happened?”

“Father Emperor missed *everything*!” complains Chengle, who has now calmed down a bit with the help of Shen Yuan and Mobei Jun.

That Mobei Jun is so good with children –puppies, as he calls them– will always be a surprise, but a very welcome one.

“Baba Yuan had a, *poof*! Breathless! Asthma attack! He couldn’t breathe and Uncle Ai-plein gave him medicine but it didn’t work and open windows didn’t work and Mobei-bofu opened an air portal in his face! And it worked! And then Jiu-ge and Uncle Yue fought, and it was horrible and Jiu-ge shouted things! And he left, *BAM*, ugly door slam! But Baba Yuan wouldn’t let me hear what they were saying!! Jiu-ge must have used some really rude words because I understood motherfu-…” and Shen Yuan quickly covers his mouth to avoid the boy’s cursing. Chengle licks his hand, but it obviously doesn’t work, so Shen Yuan just tugs on the boy’s ear a little as a reprimand before releasing Chengle’s mouth. “Rude words I shouldn’t say and that I’ve never heard An-ge use! Of course not!” and Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. “And then Uncle Yue left too. But he closed the door softly. And then Mobei-bofu gave me desserts and Uncle Ai-plein almost fainted when Baba Yuan asked Mobei-bofu if he didn’t want to have children of his own because he’s good at taking care of spoiled babies like me and Mobei-bofu said that he should have five to nine children to ensure the good lineage of the North.”

“And that was a lot of sugar for you,” Shen Yuan says, his breath still slightly wheezing and his throat hoarse. He pinches his sweet boy cheek as he bounces on the sofa. He hasn’t changed out of his robes yet, but he’s back to his fuzzy socks, the tiny booties he abandoned in the entryway. “Your Uncle Airplane will have to walk you around on a leash like a puppy to burn off all that sugar. How many pieces of cake did you eat?”

“It was only three! And half! And cream puffs! I like cream puffs. I don’t need a leash!” Chengle squeals, squirming as Shen Yuan tries to catch him. He tries to run out of reach, but unfortunately, Mobei Jun catches him, lifting him into the air with one hand. “Nooo! You bad Mobei-bofu, put me down, put me down! I don’t like air prison! *Nooo*!”

Shen Yuan sighs. He stands up, clutching the sofa, but Luo Binghe is quickly there, helping him without his cane. He's sure it must be somewhere in his bedroom where he dropped it in his desperation to breathe. Damn, half the apartment is *freezing.*

“That was a noisy arrival,” Shen Yuan murmurs, sighing. His chest still hurts a little. “I’ll be lucky if the neighbors don’t want to kick us out after this.”

“Let them try,” Luo Binghe says, as ridiculous as those simple words can sound, yet a vile and cruel threat. Shen Yuan snorts a laugh.

“I can fight my battles,” he protests, taking a couple of steps anyway. He still feels a little dizzy, but it’s a subtle thing, more like vertigo than anything serious. “Your horrible portal makes me sick. Make sure to do it outside the house next time.”

Shen Yuan tries to move toward the corridor, but Luo Binghe makes no move away. He watches him with a raised eyebrow.

“Is the portal making A-Yuan sick?” Luo Binghe asks, his expression strange and tense. Shen Yuan snorts, nodding. “This one has heard that the portal causes discomfort when passing through it, so… I didn’t think…”

“Eh, maybe I’m just more fragile,” Shen Yuan says, shrugging and dismissing it. “I mean, my *health* is more fragile. Jiu-ge crossed it without any problems, and he’s as human as I am.”

Then, at the mention of it, he sighs. “By the way. Binghe. If you hurt *my* brother, I’ll cut off your hands and embalm them to hang shoes by the door.”

Luo Binghe's expression is complicated, as if he can't decide whether to laugh or not.

“Why would I hurt your brother?” Luo Binghe asks, his mouth twisting into a smile. “Jiu-ge and I don’t get along, but from not getting along to *hurting him*… ”

“You *know* why,” Shen Yuan says, crossing his arms. He supposes his expression might be a little more intimidating if he weren’t covered in cold sweat. Luo Binghe slowly erases his smile, as if Shen Yuan’s serious expression could actually confirm another one of the Protagonist’s many clever deductions, and Shen Yuan sighs. “Seriously, *seriously,* I’m not in the mood for any of this. I just want my cane, my pajamas, and a hot bath and sleep. I don’t even know if I want dinner—”

He tries to move forward again, but Luo Binghe doesn't let him. Dressed in his imperial robes, he is an imposing figure, standing in the way and blocking the path. Shen Yuan narrows his eyes.

“What are you hiding there?” he says finally. Luo Binghe sighs.

“If A-Yuan gets sick from Xin Mo’s portal, he shouldn’t go any further,” he says with a strange gentleness. Shen Yuan grimaces – it’s not as if the portal is still open, Luo Binghe has already crossed it, there’s no reason for him to…

Shen Yuan feels as if the heat is leaving his face. He doesn't understand exactly why reality is hitting him in a way that feels so disturbingly strange.

“You’re going to leave,” he says. Luo Binghe lowers his head, and Shen Yuan tries to keep his voice from sounding hysterical. “Did something happen? I know you said you were going to sort things out, uh, did you leave something unfinished, or…?”

“I have to go away for a couple of days,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan feels an inexplicable lump form in his throat that he can’t quite put a name to. Chengle’s squeals and laughter in Mobei Jun’s arms and Airplane’s teasing words behind him barely register against his ears. “A-Yuan’s time in the palace has made clear many things that I hadn’t seen clearly in the past. Circumstances that only my ego had been able to ignore,” he adds, his smile twisting humorlessly. “The neglect of my children and the overbearing attitude of some of their mothers is something I cannot allow, nor accept. A-Yuan and Chengle will have to excuse my absence these past few days while I make sure the message is… understood.”

There's something raw and human about Luo Binghe, opening like a spring flower. In all those forbidding robes, he's never looked more fragile, as if he fears that even his repentant words might be wrong. Shen Yuan can't help but be aware of the way his heart beats against his ears, against his throat, a warmth against his chest that wasn't right for being in that wandering world, but right for being with Luo Binghe.

“Come on, I understand. Don’t worry. You’re a father first and foremost,” Shen Yuan says, and Luo Binghe’s smile twists a little, becoming more pleasant. “Being a father takes time,

especially if you're… well, trying harder. I understand that. But talk to Chengle. He was pretty desperate to get back to his normality here, and he won't take kindly to you suddenly leaving if you don't speak clearly to him, okay?"

He swallows the lump in his throat. Luo Binghe smiles a little, a tiny smile that looks genuine on his face. Shen Yuan almost squeals when he leans in, fearing another damn kiss that never comes—Luo Binghe wraps his arms around him in a soft, firm hug that makes him feel like he's going to melt in his grasp.

"A-Yuan is the best father," Luo Binghe says, his voice a whispered melody against his ear. "How could I not notice each of my flaws when I saw each of your virtues? How could I not hate each of my mistakes when I saw all your successes? Your sacrifice, your love, your compassion. How could I not want to do better just because you've reminded me that there was something better for them, *for me*?"

Shen Yuan feels too choked up to respond verbally. He hugs him with tight arms, patting his back.

"Fool," is all he can say, and Luo Binghe laughs. His hot laugh against the skin of his neck sends shivers down his spine. And it's probably kind of ridiculous, Luo Binghe leaning into that embrace, almost bending to hold and be held, fitting in so strangely, yet comfortably, that —

"Father Emperor, *no*!" Shen Yuan winces as he hears Chengle's squeal, the sound of the boy roughly freeing himself from Mobei Jun's playful grasp. "No! Bad! Not *that!* Not enough points for Father Emperor! Back off!"

Shen Yuan is clearly reluctantly released from the hug. Chengle is running towards them, fully prepared to fight if necessary, but all his sulkiness is blown away with a ferocious laugh when Luo Binghe scoops him up in his arms, tossing him in the air like he's nothing more than a small sack of rice and catching him. Shen Yuan no longer feels like vertigo when he sees his little one in dangerous situations, but it still feels like his stomach has turned upside down!!

"Father Emperor, no!" Chengle squeaks, and squirming as Luo Binghe hugs him tightly, tickling his sides. "No, no, *nooo*!"

"I've got you," Luo Binghe says, and though Chengle continues to resist, it's his little hands that grip tightly onto his father's robes. He doesn't seem to want to leave of his own will. "Can't I give hugs to my family? Haven't I earned it?"

"No!" Chengle protests. Then, he pouts and says, "… Just a few."

Luo Binghe smiles, a smile so wide it lights up his entire face and pulls the boy into a tight hug again. Chengle doesn't squirm this time, though Shen Yuan is sure that tug on his father's hair was probably a little more intentional than accidental as Luo Binghe pulls him out of his embrace.

“Father Emperor doesn’t have enough points to be *this* close to Baba Yuan,” the boy protests, without hesitation, causing Shen Yuan to burst out laughing. “Not enough yet! Being this close is just with me! All of us together or *nothing.*”

“Understood, Little Prince,” Luo Binghe says, and from the playful expression on his face, he doesn’t seem to be insincere at all. And then, kneeling to be face to face with the boy, Luo Binghe twists his expression into a much gentler one before saying, “Would you like to accompany me to the kitchen and help me unpack what I brought for your Baba?”

Chengle gives him a look, and Shen Yuan smiles encouragingly. Then, Chengle turns his small face toward Luo Binghe, nodding. Shen Yuan surmises that Binghe will use this moment to talk to Chengle about not being home for a few days, and Shen Yuan sighs. He leans against the wall, his chest still tight.

“Hey, bro,” he says, raising his head as Airplane approaches. He has a slightly worried expression on his face. “Need anything?”

“Clean up your mess,” he complains, and Airplane smiles a little. It’s not that he’s left *that* big a mess, but it’s true that the house doesn’t seem to have been swept or vacuumed, let alone the trash disposed of properly. “I’ll go take a bath. Be careful when you go into the room to clean; there’s a huge evil portal in the middle of the room.”

Airplane's expression widens. Then he snorts, as if at this point even that can't be surprising enough. He's turning around when Shen Yuan reaches out to grab his sleeve. Shen Yuan has no idea why, and Airplane probably doesn’t either; the latter freezes, staring at him with a strange, almost frightened expression.

“I’m not going to fall,” Shen Yuan mumbles, and Airplane seems a little less tense and somewhat relieved by this. “Just… it’s nice to see you again.”

“Cucumber-bro got sentimental, huh?” Airplane mocks, and before he can land a hit, the slippery fool lets go and backs away. “Just kidding, just kidding. I missed you too, bro.”

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Clinging to the wall, he locks himself in the bathroom. Yes, the xianxia world is great, but nothing in the realms of demons and cultivators could replace the plumbing and hot water of a good shower.

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Shen Yuan feels like he's just been *truly* revived. Even if his shower doesn't last too long, taking off all his uncomfortable clothes feels like a gift. He hadn't realized how much he was going to miss all the little things he took for granted, things as simple and comfortable as the warm, steady rain of water, being surrounded by a familiar, safe room, and being able to know where everything is without having to rely on others to pack or fetch it for him.

The scent of his soap and the perfume of his shampoo help to take away a lot of the exhaustion and pain. By the time he finishes his shower, he can no longer smell the incense clinging to the fabrics or the herbal aroma on his skin, and he feels more like he's just human

than a fragile, pathetic human surrounded by demons and cultivators who could murder him with a finger or a flick of the wrist.

And with just a resigned sigh, in the absence of his own clothes, well, didn't he leave some in the bathroom cabinet drawers for Luo Binghe? They're embarrassingly huge on him, but warm and cozy with the familiar smell of detergent, and Shen Yuan comes out of the bathroom to find that Luo Binghe has assigned Airplane and Mobei Jun to pick up all the trash (which, surprisingly, is two huge bags. Seriously, hasn't he taken out the trash all these days?), and Airplane is looking at him with slightly wild eyes.

“I know,” Shen Yuan complains. “There’s an open portal in my room, and I’m not going to risk another asthma attack over pajamas.”

“*Bro*,” says Airplane, and for some reason, it sounds like an insult.

His cane has been placed next to the sofa. Shen Yuan uses it to reach the kitchen, where Chengle is helping unpack and arrange all the food Luo Binghe has brought. Apparently, she's had some time to make some dumplings, or boil some water for some mild broth. His son is the first to turn to look at him, a radiant smile shining on his face.

“Baba Yuan!” and jumps out of his chair to run and hug him. Shen Yuan laughs, brushing the boy’s hair with his fingers. “Those clothes look ugly on you.”

Shen Yuan laughs. “That’s not a nice thing to say,” he chides a little, and his son, who is far too smart for Shen Yuan’s own good, gives him a puppy-dog grin that completely prevents Shen Yuan from scolding him. Still, he pinches his cheek a little. “Aren’t you the cutest, huh? Come on. It’s not right for you to say things like that. Other people might feel bad if you say those things to them.”

“I won’t say them,” Chengle says, with a deep sigh.

Shen Yuan smiles, raising his head when he notices Luo Binghe standing quite still from across the kitchen. He has both hands holding one of the glass containers. From the way he's holding it, Shen Yuan suddenly has a sudden fear that the container might break in his hands.

Something in his eyes, too, makes him feel immediately embarrassed.

"Anyway," he clears his throat, moving away from his son to move to the chair. "Has your father talked to you yet?"

Chengle pouts before saying, “Father Emperor is going to be gone for a few days, but it’s not to abandon me, it’s because-…”

“Because I have responsibilities in the palace,” Luo Binghe spoke abruptly, cutting off his son’s words. Chengle frowned at him, and Shen Yuan snorted. Really, these two… “But I’ll be back soon enough. After that, I’ll only be gone for a few sichen every now and then. There’s no need to worry.”

Chengle is the one huffing now, clearly grumbling a bit, but he doesn't seem grumpy or ready to cry. Shen Yuan knows, of course, that an abandonment wound as deep as his, in the heart of such a clearly sensitive child, won't take long to heal. However, he also knows that little by little, it has been healing, and he's incredibly proud of his little one.

Luo Binghe continues unpacking the food with the help of Chengle, the cheerful little boy who always finds food he likes and knows he's going to eat. When Mobei Jun shows up to look for another garbage bag overflowing with takeout boxes, Shen Yuan can't contain his curiosity and asks, "Did Mobei Jun stay behind to keep watch or...?"

Luo Binghe is slightly surprised. Then, shrugging, he says, “He stayed so we could go back.”

“Huh?” Shen Yuan tilts his head, confused. “How?”

“There are… a very large number of worlds, as A-Yuan already knows,” Luo Binghe hums, explaining softly. “This world has some sort of direct connection to the world I belongs to, but it is a very weak connection and it is… not unique. Many other worlds, for some reason,” and Luo Binghe gives him another curious look, “have a much stronger connection. I didn’t know why yet,” he clarifies quickly, before Shen Yuan can even ask a question, “but… I have noticed that the more… *souls* from my world there are in a world, the easier it is to find a way between them. Souls are still difficult to track, though, but while Chengle was in this world, it was much easier once he knew what path to follow.”

“Oh,” Shen Yuan said, and understood, a little. “So Mobei Jun was like a, err, bookmark, so you wouldn’t lose the world?”

Luo Binghe nods. Chengle has been silent and curious, of course, so it’s no surprise to Shen Yuan when he asks: “Can we visit other worlds? Will there be dinosaurs there?”

“No,” Shen Yuan says, so quickly that he surprises himself because he hasn’t even thought about it. Then he sighs. “I don’t know,” he clarifies, seeing his son’s sad expression. “Let your Baba sleep and spend at least a week in this world of his before thinking about going on excursions to other ones, okay honey?”

“Yes!” Chengle nods, with a tiny smile. “I’d like a world with dinosaurs. Or one where Atlantis exists.”

“That won't be difficult,” Luo Binghe murmurs, naturally capturing his son's attention. “In our world, there is an underwater kingdom that can be entered through a crystal mirror in the ruins of an island. However, to reach that mirror, one must navigate a complex series of traps and trials…”

…which Luo Binghe had already crossed in search of a rare, mystical flower that grew at the bottom of that underwater kingdom, and from where he had also obtained a wife and the loyalty of the kingdom by saving them from a strange monster that held them captive. Shen Yuan is fully aware of this story, somewhat amused as Luo Binghe, the rascal, is an exceptional storyteller who entertains by leaving out all the parts that would make Chengle uncomfortable, such as blood, violence, and all the wife plot. Regardless, it's enjoyable to hear, and Chengle seems far more captivated than he usually is.

In fact, it's such a comfortable, enjoyable moment that Shen Yuan actually forgets Luo Binghe has to leave. Not even an hour has passed since they've arrived when Luo Binghe has finished unpacking and called Mobei Jun to leave. Clearly, keeping the portal open for so long is taking some physical toll on him, but apparently, based on what Binghe had explained, it's a lot harder to open and close them than simply leaving them open. Shen Yuan supposes it makes sense; something like, the wear and tear of just turning on an engine versus leaving it running? Not that Shen Yuan knows much about any of that stuff, but it's the kind of thing that gets said!

It's no surprise to Shen Yuan that Mobei Jun and Airplane get along… good. Well, they've been living together these days, plus other situations where they've inevitably had to play babysitter together. It's good that they at least get along. Shen Yuan ignores them for a bit while urging Chengle to hug his father goodbye, and Chengle does so – and although at first he genuinely seems to do so reluctantly, the truth is that as soon as Luo Binghe hugs him, the child climbs up and hangs with all his might from his little arms.

"Don't take too long to come back," Chengle says, in a voice that's probably meant to be threatening. It's like a puppy wanting to growl. "Or you'll lose all your points for making Baba Yuan sad!"

"Oh," Luo Binghe said, having the decency to look so fake scared it's ridiculous. "In that case, I'll be very quick. That way, your Baba won't be sad."

"You better!" Chengle continues to complain. Shen Yuan snorts, rushing forward with every intention of pinching Chengle's cheek to scold him, and letting out a stifled gasp when Luo Binghe pulls him with his free arm to join him in the hug. "Hey!" Chengle complains, but seems caught by his own words because he's stuck in the middle of the hug, pouting plaintively.

"Chengle is in the hug," Luo Binghe, the enormous fool, reminds him, making his boy pout even more. "Then I can hug A-Yuan without losing points."

Chengle still doesn't seem to agree, but Shen Yuan running his hands through his hair and squeezing him into a tighter hug won't change anything. Chengle lets himself be hugged, holding onto them with determination and strength, and by the time Luo Binghe lets them out of his embrace, Chengle has managed to climb up and cling to Shen Yuan, so Shen Yuan has to balance himself a bit with his cane and the large, clingy child perched on it.

"Take good care of your Baba," Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan rolls his eyes at the same time that Chengle nods enthusiastically. "Make sure he eats well and takes his medicine."

"I can take care of myself, is not the Chengle's responsibility" Shen Yuan protests. And he's glad he can't see the look Chengle is giving him, which is clearly questioning him. With a sigh, he sets the boy down, sitting on the armrest of the sofa to get some air. "Go on. Take that ugly portal out of my bedroom and make sure you come back soon. Take care of yourself."

Mobei Jun heads for the portal first. Shen Yuan remains in the living room, sitting, unable to risk getting too close to the room; only when Mobei Jun and Luo Binghe have left does the

air in the entire apartment feel… light. It's as if Shen Yuan can physically sense that the portal has closed, because his own breathing feels less ragged, even if a strange tightness against his chest has only grown deeper.

He figures he should be used to Luo Binghe leaving by now. He just doesn't understand why it doesn't seem like something he can get used to.

Shen Yuan flops back onto the sofa. It's so comfortable he could fall asleep, not just from the comfort, but from the *familiarity.* He's home. He's in his own home, finally.

"Baba," Chengle says, climbing up, squishing his ribs uncomfortably for a moment until he manages to balance himself next to him. "Won't Baba Yuan be too sad again?"

Shen Yuan snorts. However, before he can respond, Chengle mutters, "I don't want Baba to be sad like Mom."

Shen Yuan feels his breath hitch slightly. He half-rises to hug the boy tightly in his arms. "I won't be," he promises, even though his voice cracks at the edges. "And even if I'm a little sad sometimes, whenever I'm sad, I'm going to love you just as much as when I'm happy. You know that?"

Chengle nods. Then, weakly and softly, he says, "Like Mom?" Shen Yuan watches his little boy hesitate for a moment before he says, "Mom said she doesn't hate me and that she doesn't love the baby more than me. But it makes sense if I thought she did because she did something wrong that made my heart hurt so much. And it's okay if I'm mad at her. But I'm not mad anymore." His little boy pouts. "Mom said she's trying really hard not to be sad. But I still don't like it. I don't like that she is sad but I can't do *anything*."

"Oh, baby, I know," and as Shen Yuan hugs Chengle even tighter, his child letting himself be pampered, Shen Yuan can only think that if at the end of the day his child has come to that conclusion where he is sure that his mother does not hate him, his entire journey in that other world has been completely worth it.

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Airplane remains a good moral support afterward, even if Shen Yuan doesn't understand exactly *why* he calls himself that. On the positive side, he takes out the trash bags, puts all the clothes in the wash (probably without regard for colors or whether some pieces needed to be washed by hand, but Shen Yuan won't ask for miracles), and runs a hot bubble bath for Chengle.

"There's no more evil portal in your room," Airplane says, pulling on his foot to drag him across the sofa until there's a free spot for him to slump on. "Your son's taking a bath like a good boy, and I ordered a ton of sushi. How was it at the palace, huh? Drop the tea."

Shen Yuan barely moves, staring upside down as Airplane wiggles his eyebrows in such a way that he feels like punching him. He huffs, turning on the sofa to sit down, only slightly dizzy from the sudden movement. When he composes himself, he sums it all up in a simple:

“Terrifyingly cool,” and he’s not even being sarcastic, even when he says, “There were demon servants everywhere, amazing plants, and so many kids. One almost stabbed me, and Xiao Gongzhu tried to kill me, but I beat her.”

Airplane lets out a strangled sound of indignation. Shen Yuan spends the next ten minutes summarizing the most important things, and Airplane, despite everything, is *hallucinating*. Shen Yuan supposes it must be pretty chaotic for the hack author to face the fact not only that his damn imaginative world *is* real, but that Shen Yuan had faced the chaos his narrative pen of nonsense had implied.

Although he had to give him the point that his world could be… an amazing thing.

Shen Yuan has no idea if it's due to the exhaustion of the day, but he's downright tired. He’s barely said a couple of things before he starts yawning, so Airplane gives up asking him stuff for now. After all, he has the perfect excuse of recovering. His throat doesn't hurt, and he doesn't have a fever, but Mu Qingfang left him too many instructions to risk not following them and relapsing. He's already recovered in a miraculous amount of time between antibiotics and xianxia tinctures; the last thing he wants is to push his luck further.

His bedroom is cold. Airplane must have closed the window, but even so, the air remains chilly. Outside, there's a thick snowfall, a frigid wind whipping against the glass, and Shen Yuan watches the dark gray sky, the city lights, and the distant grimace of passing cars, his eyes filling with normalcy for a moment that may be too long.

Sighing, he moves across the room, ready to just burrow into bed and sleep for a long while. Not hungry at all, maybe he can get away with sleeping until—

“*Fuck*,” Shen Yuan hisses as he steps on something not only noticeably sharp but also feels the sharp pain against his foot. He backs away, trying hard not to lose his balance. Is that a piece of glass? He doesn’t understand why it’s red; he’s sure he didn’t step on the thing hard enough to slash through the thick sock and draw blood. Where the hell did—

The glass thing turns out not to be red with blood, but because it is a small piece of red-tinted crystal, neatly shaped like a flower with spiky petals stuck to a hair pin, now broken where Shen Yuan stepped on it. Shen Yuan crouches on the ground, staring at the delicate hair piece, the broken red flower in his hand, wondering how the hell it ended up there. Perhaps it had been stuck to Luo Binghe’s clothes, or was it on one of the stuffed tigers?

But how…?

…

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath. Almost dizzy, he leans closer to the carpeted floor, peering under the bed. There, two small, dark eyes peer out at him from the darkness. Once he sees those eyes, it's much easier to identify the shapes of the small child hiding under the bed: the dark hair, the flower hairpins, the silks wrapped around her. Even the small hands, covered in rings that look heavy and awkward, are identifiable once Shen Yuan can make out the shapes of the shadows.

“My, my,” Shen Yuan hums, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. “How did Little Princess Baoxian get here?”

Chapter End Notes

MQF: *tearing the potentially mpreg aphrodisiac from SY's hands*
SY: Uh, will the poison be so dangerous...?

Moshang, having a date with cakes and Kung Fu Hustle: ლ(ᵕ ɜᵕ)♡(ᵕε ᵕლ
SY: *arrives practically dying*
SQH: *sighs* then there will be no third base today

SY: OH NO, BINGHE IS GOING TO KISS ME AGAIN D:
LBH: *hugs him*
SY: ... why isn't he kissing me?

SY: *with clothes in Binghe's size and colors* yea, sorry, since you occupied my bedroom with a wicked portal, I had no choice-
LBH: *making a horny grip on the food container so hard he could break it*

SY: Look Jiu-ge, I'm sorry, I know you missed your lawyer's appointment because of me
SY: *gently pushing Baoxian towards him* here, a child as compensation

...and with this we finally finish the harem arc :P yes, surprisingly (did you notice?) this fic is divided into arcs. Or something like that. The type of title of each arc changes (more or less, that's what I try) so even if I haven't explicitly specified it, it changes!! I say this because, hey, we're about to enter the final dramatic-narrative arc. Does that imply that there is a defined number of chapters left for this to end? No, definitely, because I have attachment problems and I won't be able to let go of Chengle and I will continue writing spontaneous extras about him and the future fic I promised with the angst AU of SY transmigrating on SQQ and maybe extra epilogues for this fic and *cries* sorry. I've become so attached to this baby boy and this fic that it feels physically difficult to let it go :'D

Btw it makes me laugh that the title refers to like 3 different things in the whole chapter ehe

ANYWAY, I feel sorry for Binghe, he's not having a good time, he's really trying (I never said it would be easy, but he's trying), I mean, he's genuinely in love with SY already and wants to be with him, but he's understood through SY that family is something he can aspire to and have in the way he dreamed of and not just the way he was told he "should" - I don't know, this sad big fool gives me a lot of feelings. At least he's doing better now :P

Chengle, my sweet boy, your father would lose all those points if you knew half of what this man has done, but I want to clarify that 40% of that was for breaking into your Baba's closet, so I think those are worth it :B Anyway, how many marriage points do you think Binghe has now? :B not enough, probably

I want you to know that Airplane has AT LEAST 2 hickeys on his neck right now and is breaking out in a cold sweat every time SY looks at him because he doesn't want to explain why he's messing around with the character he created. It's not that SY can say anything since he has being kissed by Binghe a little, it's just that Airplane doesn't know it yet (he suspects it) and wants to avoid his mockery :P

I just ruined my sleep schedule by editing this chapter but HEY!!! I wanted you to start the weekend well :P
I hope you enjoyed the chapter A LOT! I definitely enjoyed SO MUCH writing this. I want you to know that EVERY TIME I reread the Qijiu fight I was covering my mouth and stifling my whimpers. I'm weak for Qijiu who has problems and must force themselves to solve them. SO YOU KNOW!! Kudo-comment-interaction!!! I definitely missed you very much!!!! Let's have fun together in the comments!! :3
Anyway, I'm going to sleep hehehehe :P
See you soon!!!

Chapter 35: Shen Jiu's First Interlude

Chapter Notes

Me: Mmm, so, I was thinking of doing a couple of short chapters from Shen Jiu's pov—
You all unanimously: YES. PLEASE. YES.

Also, me: Hey, how are I supposed to write Shen Jiu's pov?
My sister: Do it like Bingge, only less Xin-moish, but more drama queen
Me: Hey, why does that work? It scares me

Chapter warnings: Shen Jiu past™. In one sentence, it's referenced that Qijiu was in a relationship while Yue Qi was in college and Shen Jiu was still in high school—their relationship was established before Yue Qi graduated or turned 18. You can make a rabbit hole out of that or not

Enjoy the chapter! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There aren't many things that *truly* anger Shen Jiu. Most people who knew him would say otherwise—and honestly, Shen Jiu couldn't deny they had reason to think so. He doesn't usually consider the rules of decorum, kindness to those who haven't earned it, or even basic courtesy toward people who don't deserve it. Why waste time, patience, and mental space on kindness, on smiles, on giving more than what was deserved?

You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, Yue Qi used to say, sometimes. And he would smile, apologize, and be irritatingly kind to incompetent doctors who couldn't do their jobs properly, to dreadful lawyers who didn't understand the urgency of resolving emergency situations before more time had passed, or to shady associates looking to take advantage and climb the ladder by exploiting others. Shen Jiu had never understood him. What did Yue Qi ever gain by smiling through irritation, by hiding that sharpness behind gentleness?

However, none of that had angered him. Yue Qi *could* be irritating, yes, how could anyone not be irritating to someone with the personality Shen Jiu knew he had? He found it hard to tolerate the invasion of his personal space, but he also found it hard to let go of Yue Qi. He hated feeling the distance between them, the despair gnawing at him like the hunger of a wild beast; he hated the thought that Yue Qi might one day look up and see a different, clearer path, with a much easier life where he didn't have to pretend before a society that could ruin him if their relationship were exposed.

It devastated him, *it ruined him,* the idea that Yue Qi could choose to walk away to an easier life with a smiling wife who didn't see his falsely kind smiles with a weary look, as if it were

a matter of his free will, as if *years* of being with Shen Jiu hadn't made him fully aware that, papers on the table or ring in hand *or not*, Yue Qi belonged *to him*. He was his—as were his spaces, his comfort, his dreams, his past, and his future. *His* as he belonged to him, his to love, to care for. His to be *loyal to,* to be *honest with.*

Shen Jiu abhorred dishonesty. He tolerated lying; he wasn't a complete hypocrite. People have to lie to survive. How else had he survived being gay in a China that had barely stopped treating them as mentally deranged when Shen Jiu wasn't even fourteen? Even if it had never been a *secret* —it wasn't something he could say publicly either. Not at the office, not at press conferences for the family business, not among his university classmates or future colleagues in the industry. Lying was *necessary.* Survival—where his very existence could be censored, crushed, like a stray insect escaped from its glass display—was *essential*.

Dishonesty is different from lying. It goes beyond evading the truth; dishonesty is concealing, hiding, being fully aware of what evading the facts would mean for a person and still *screwing up.* Dishonesty is, with the most complete example presented on a silver platter, Yue Qi knowing for the last thirty-two years of his life that *they had shared another life,* that every one of the night terrors Shen Jiu had had since adolescence had a meaning beyond sleep disturbances from consuming horror movies, analog horror, urban exploration, or whatever doctors of all kinds said when his nightmares only *worsened* to the point of needing psychiatric help to get even a little rest.

Sixteen years. For sixteen years of his life, Shen Jiu had been *plagued* by the most horrendous night terrors. Anxiety, insomnia, panic attacks—all of it resulted in a simple and inevitable series of obvious consequences that prevented him from getting any sleep at all. *Nothing* relieved him. Only occasionally, sneaking off to sleep at his best friend's house could get him *any rest.* Tobacco had calmed his anxiety, his constant, overwhelming need to be doing something or to feel like *he was going to die.*

And Yue Qi. *Qi-ge.* Yue Qi had been disgustingly indulgent. Even when his idiot older brother accused Shen Jiu of being unfaithful by sneaking off to sleep over at his girl friends' houses, the truth was that Yue Qi had *never* believed a word of it. And Mingsu had received a few blows from Shen Jiu afterward, even if they both knew that he only did it to annoy him and provoke a reaction from him, the restless teenager who only knew how to communicate through blows, who gave neck locks instead of hugs, who sought attention through complaints and taunts.

Yue Qi had always been so… understanding. He would ride his bicycle across town in the middle of the night to help Shen Jiu whenever he needed it. When his family moved around the time Yuan-di's health worsened and Yue Qi had the opportunity to go to university, he chose a university, a job, and an apartment that was only a ten-minute walk from their new house downtown.

Shen Jiu had never felt happier (and more embarrassed, and more exposed) than when, in his final year of high school, nearing eighteen, he would be picked up by Qi-ge in his car. Sometimes, the idiot would make a fool of himself by honking the horn a couple of times to get his attention, or—on sunny, sunny days—wait for him outside the car, leaning against him in a relaxed and irresistible pose, handsome with his messy hair, and Shen Jiu had to

physically restrain himself from jumping at him. It was the early 2000s, and with all the abrupt impact of Westernization, Qi-ge wasn't standing around looking like a movie star, picking him up in his brand-new black car and saving him the walk, with soft music playing on the radio while he let Shen Jiu rant about his day, his teachers, his idiot classmates, and his pre-gaokao exams.

Qi-ge had always been so… *forgiving.* That was the word, how could it be any other? Even when Shen Jiu interrupted his sleep, even when he tore him from his comforts, even when he restricted him, locked him into his complicated family life, into his declining mental health, even when he hated Shen Jiu's smoking but still secretly bought him packs of cigarettes as long as he did it in moderation, even when from the moment he met him, Shen Jiu had demanded from him, taken, ravaged, sunk his hands into every aspect of his life, his destiny, his future, without so much as a protest. He had allowed it. If Shen Jiu had taken his hand, Qi-ge would let Shen Jiu take his arms if necessary. He was patient. Tolerant. Infinitely adaptable. He anticipated what Shen Jiu wanted, thought, and hoped for. If Shen Jiu saw something wrong, Qi-ge already knew what to do to fix it and, more importantly, *what* it was that particularly bothered him, even before Shen Jiu knew exactly what it was.

It hadn't been a bed of roses, *oh,* of course not. Hiding it had been the biggest problem, and the next biggest was that neither of them had the time or the energy to be together as much as they wanted. Telling their parents had been ridiculous (had there ever really been any doubt, ever? His mother was even *happy* that he finally trusted her enough to tell her…), and while Yue Qi's parents and his younger brother were a little less warm, they had never been unpleasant. By the time he reached his mid-twenties with his degree, a stable job, a house of his own, and the romantic dream of his high school sweetheart, Shen Jiu had every reason to be happy.

Except that he wasn't.

It was like digging his hands into a wound that didn’t hurt—only *itched.* Constantly. Unbearably. A constant sensation, an impossible-to-scratch itch, but deep in his brain. Something that was there and wasn't at the same time. Sometimes, he would wake up screaming. Sometimes, he would wake up paralyzed with fear. Sometimes, even when he was awake and Qi-ge had his hands on his waist, Shen Jiu would have to shove him away desperately, with the most unexpected panic attack, a feeling of dread corroding him as if someone had once laid hands on him and created an effect of terror bound to his flesh, to his instincts. Sometimes, a taste, a smell, a person crossing the street and looking at him as if they knew him but continuing on their way, were enough to trigger it.

Even when everything had to be perfect, *nothing was.*

Of course it wasn't.

Not psychologists, not psychiatrists, not neurologists—not even the damned alternative and charlatans healers he’d sought out for years in desperation, searching for solutions to understand, *to* know *what to do,* how to fix it, how to fix himself before ending up broken to pieces by a terror beyond his comprehension – none of them could have had even the slightest idea that the disorder did not come from his mind, but from his soul.

None, except Qi-ge. Yue Qi. Qi-ge.

Yue Qingyuan.

Qi-ge.

Yue Qi.

Qi-ge. Qi-ge. *Qi-ge.*

For sixteen years, *for his entire life,* Yue Qi had watched him wander, searching for answers. Suffering. Condemning himself. Blaming himself. What was wrong with his head? Why didn't any damn antidepressant work? Why did anxiety course through his veins like his own blood, why did panic rob him of feeling in his limbs, why did his chest ache and burn in utter despair without him even being able to find a reason? What was wrong with his head, what was wrong with him? Why couldn't anyone find a cure, why couldn't anyone give him a solution? Why didn't anything relieve a pain that sometimes paralyzed him, leaving him unable to move, why couldn't anyone actually prescribe him something that would *work* and help? Why did they say everything was fine *when clearly nothing was fine?*

And Yue Qi had witnessed that suffering, silently, *for years. H*e had comforted him, wiped away his tears, soothed his pain practically by licking his wounds.

He had remained *silent.* Without explanation. Without response. He had watched Shen Jiu writhe in his own agony, *and he had let it happen.* He had let him wonder, let him cry for endless hours, cared for him as if he had the right after years of silence. They had made it *through*, despite everything. They had made plans. They had envisioned a future. They had done so much for a future that would overwrite the present that haunted Shen Jiu that, now Shen Jiu could see it, Yue Qi had seemed practically desperate to leave behind the entire present that twisted within him with sordid terror. As if envisioning a perfect future could tear away his past, paint a new landscape over an old painting.

Of course, Qi-ge had been so willing to soothe his pain, to appease it, to sweep it under the rug, and to bestow upon his every idyllic moment of his life. Of course, Yue Qi had been so indulgent, allowing him to take more than anyone else would ever have allowed, letting him mold both their lives to his own liking, to his comfort, his convenience. Of course he hadn't uttered a single complaint, opinion, or idea that could even contradict any of his decisions or actions.

Of course, even in another life, Yue Qingyuan would choose to remain silent rather than give a damn explanation.

His head burns as if it's about to explode. He's not entirely sure how many red lights he's run, but when he shuts himself in his house—the kitchen counter still with the unwashed coffee cup, the newspaper open where Shen Jiu had left it before deciding he'd had enough of his damn brother not answering him and his idiot friend pretending to be him, the plants with their soil dried out from lack of daily watering—the whole sense of familiarity, of home that should have come with the sight of his own walls, his own space, feels dirty. Corrupted, cruel, hostile.

Yue Qi hadn't protested those curtains even though it was clear he didn't like them, but how could he protest when they concealed such a big secret? And Yue Qi hated Shen Jiu smoking in the house, but what else could he do but empty the ashtrays and change the air fresheners, clean the yellowed traces that tobacco left on the linoleum or the furniture, if keeping quiet was surely eating him alive?

How could he complain, speak, breathe a word—when he couldn't say the one thing that *mattered*? With what face could he protest, voice any complaint, be more than complacent?

There aren't many things that can anger Shen Jiu, after all; contrary to what his family, work acquaintances, and some former university classmates might believe, Shen Jiu actually possesses basic communication skills, bestowed upon him by a loving family, a mother who never judged him, a father who never humiliated him. A family that loves and provides for him had made him someone who, if his soul could glimpse who he had become, would be *disgusted.* Love weakens the spirit—it's unreal, hollow, fragile. Unknown, too. Distant. *Pathetic*. Patience—what is gained by patience? Why should he *not* be furious?

Shen Jiu is furious. He's furious because he can't even be furious. He's furious because every piece of his happy life has shattered before his eyes; the last few years of his life—no, his *entire* life—has crumbled. Even when he thought that after losing all sense of reality he still had Yue Qi, the truth—always the same truth—is that he never could count on him.

What good is loyalty, when every moment of comfort was built on a lie?

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

When Yue Qi knocks on the door, Shen Jiu is already waiting for him.

He would have loved to do something absolutely dramatic; after all, who doesn't love a little chaos dressed as passion, a touch of spectacle to make pain look beautiful? Drama probably would have granted him a tiny moment of joy amidst that whole utter garbage experience. He imagines himself gathering all Yue Qi's clothes and throwing them off the balcony, his voice echoing in the hallway in an over-the-top shouting match that neighbors would talk about for weeks—something loud, raw, and human enough to make the ache feel real for everyone.

Just packing all his bags and kicking him out before he could even set foot inside the house didn't feel enough. It felt as if it had to remain written on the walls, corroding among the memories forever of their large, comfortable three-bedroom apartment, with its two bathrooms, a sleek and beautiful kitchen, large windows with a spectacular view, all in a pleasant building full of families they'd met before even moving in, and none of whom had had any issues with their relationship, in a comfortable residential district surrounded by parks, schools, and recreational activities for children and teenagers— A place ready for a family. A home prepared to welcome them as if they were one.

Shen Jiu is too tired. Too hollowed out, as if all the fury in him had burned down to embers, leaving only the smoke.

"You have the key," he says, his tone quiet and stripped of everything that used to make it sharp—no venom, no warmth, just exhaustion wearing human skin. Having showered, Shen

Jiu has even had time to apply face cream—bless hyaluronic acid in creams and lifting night creams, seriously, his face appreciated it—change into pajamas and a silk robe, and even put oil in his hair before Yue Qi decided to return like a damned dog with its tail between its legs. “You don’t have to knock on the damn door like you don’t live here. This is still your house.”

There is a moment of silence before the clatter of keys is heard on the other side. The door opens slowly, and when Yue Qi enters, Shen Jiu has to bite the inside of his cheek at the fascinating feeling of schadenfreude he experiences at the sight of Yue Qi's face. He looks beyond miserable—as if both his lives had caved in, layer after layer, crushing him into something fragile. Even his height, his broad shoulders, the body once built to protect, now seem like a burden dragging him down into a deep suffering.

Fine. Let him suffer.

“Xiao J-…”

“Shut up,” Shen Jiu says. Two words, and yet they land with the weight of mercy disguised as cruelty—a tenderness he no longer wants to feel, and cannot help giving. Less than he deserves, more than he should give him. Yue Qi lowers his head, and Shen Jiu looks away, stepping down from the high stool. Yue Qi has always been tall, broad-shouldered, and *strong*. In a visceral and desperate way, Shen Jiu had *loved him*. Yue Qi had always made him feel small, someone Yue Qi could wrap in his arms and protect from the world. It’s almost ridiculous that, at that moment, every one of those aspects seems ridiculous in the miserable man who can’t even look him in the eye. “If you’re going to apologize, don’t say a word to me. I don’t want to hear about you unless you have an explanation to give me.”

Shen Jiu doesn't even have any hope when Yue Qi opens his mouth. Of course, not a sound comes out.

Shen Jiu knows every word he can say now to unsettle him. He knows every one of his weaknesses. He knows every mistake he's made in his life, and he's at least 80% certain of every single mistake he's made in the life they shared in a past so distant it felt difficult even to glimpse. Only once had he been in that horrendous world had he felt as if his head were about to explode—repetitive images, a life that had once been his wanting to reclaim his mind, his body. Fury, despair, anger, resentment, the most visceral hatred.

Shen Jiu knows the man he loves. He knows every word he can say to humiliate him, to make him writhe in pain, to make him *suffer*. Shen Jiu knows the man before him better than he's sure he ever knew the man he once was time ago. He knows the heat of his body, the warmth of his heart, the comfort of his hands; the way his laughter stumbled into a snore when he lost control; the freckles the sun painted on his shoulders each summer like tiny, careless blessings. He knows how to break him in every possible way, and worse—he knows how to love him still. He knows what he can do to reduce him to a wreck in every possible way. He knows how to push every one of his buttons, what will make every hour of every day of the suffering Shen Jiu had to endure because this enormous fool couldn't open his mouth worthwhile.

Shen Jiu doesn't say anything, either.

“I changed the sheets,” he says, and the words fall between them like shards of ice. Yue Qi blinks, looking at him with an expression so broken it’s almost pitiful. “I told you to. You didn’t. Take a bath before you go to sleep.”

He isn’t afraid to turn his back on him; what more could he lose now? Silence has teeth, and Shen Jiu bares them with every step away. He knows that if there are pleas of Yue Qi, they aren't in his voice, but in his eyes, in how he seems on the verge of collapse. Is that what Yue Qi has been playing at, turning a deaf ear to his suffering? Fine. *Fine.* Shen Jiu can turn the tables on him. If he has nothing useful to say, he shouldn't say anything. If he wants to say something, as long as he doesn't start with a vain apology without any explanation, Shen Jiu will be willing to listen.

From the bedroom, Shen Jiu lay staring at the ceiling, wrapped in his familiar sheets, the pleasant scent of his favorite fabric softener filling the air. It was ridiculous; he had slept in a palace, in a luxurious room straight out of an archaeologist's wet dreams, surrounded by silence so heavy it felt holy, and yet, it is here, in the plain hum of the city night and the familiar scent of laundry, where comfort finally breathes again. If he weren't so tense, so hysterical, so furious, he would have pulled Yue Qi into a kiss and more until he can forgot *everything*. Leaving the palace behind would be like leaving behind any other forgotten nightmare, buried, far away.

In fact, the idea is almost *tempting*. He has too much pent-up nervous energy that he hasn't been able to burn off, and he's quite certain that hysteria and anger are no impediment whatsoever. It wouldn't be the first time he's let his stress burn away under the sheets, nor would it be the last, certainly, as long as Yue Qi allows it—and even as he's eager to please, always yearning for praise, for doing something *right*. Yet, the more he thinks about Yue Qi, the more time he spends with her, the more he can't help but be drawn in by something sordid, rough, something that pushes against his veins more than anger.

He feels too sad to feel any kind of desire right now.

Like peering at paintings from behind a security frame, noticing every single brushstroke, Shen Jiu wonders *how much* of their shared history can be attributed to it. Yue Qi had told his whole life story, so did he even know who Shen Jiu was when they first met, when Shen Jiu was barely ten years old and had to be dragged away for punching some brat who was trying to bully his best friends in elementary school? Did he know who Shen Jiu was when, a few years later, he confessed his feelings for him and begged him not to take it the wrong way? Did he know who Shen Jiu was when he first kissed him secretly, an experimental touch of mouths parched with nerves and the summer heat, with the cicadas singing and the faint taste of watermelon lingering after dinner? Did he know who Shen Jiu was at every moment of their awkward teenage years together, sneaking around, secretly kissing, drinking their first sips of wine stolen from Yue Qi's father's pantry, and getting caught and scolded?

Did he know who Shen Jiu was when he called him at four in the morning, trembling, desperate from the aftermath of a nightmare? Did he know who he was when he heard him screaming in the nights? Did he know why he couldn’t share food, why he flinched when men came too close, why laughter among boys made his skin crawl, why he trusted girls but

never their fathers? Did he know why he hoarded food like a war survivor, why every cupboard had to be full, why every plate always had to be full?

Did Yue Qi know exactly where all those nightmares came from, all along? Did he ever have any of his own? Did he know—had he known all along—that their wandering souls seemed destined to meet even from a lifetime apart?

Why hadn't he said *anything*?

Silence, too, is a kind of awful cruelty.

Shen Jiu is certain he won't be able to sleep. He's not even sure he can stay in bed while Yue Qi is there.

From the hallway, the sound of the shower turning on echoes through the silent house. Shen Jiu stares at the wall, the ceiling, the window, trying to sort out his emotions, his thoughts. His chest aches, his heart burns as if it were broken, like that ridiculous time as a teenager when he believed Yue Qi would go study abroad just because his whole family had decided to leave so his younger brother could get a better education. If his whole family was leaving, why would Yue Qi stay?

But his heart didn't break then, and it never broke during their long years together. Yue Qi stayed, and he never left his side. He stayed through all his hardships, through every ridiculous little annoyance, through every joyful moment. He stayed even when Shen Jiu didn't know if he could stay with himself, he tolerated him when he couldn't tolerate himself, he helped him, he was there for him. When one of his friends from work asked him why he wasn't bothered by not being able to get married, or why they didn't get married abroad and come back, Shen Jiu would roll his eyes. Why should he care about some silly pieces of paper when the man he loved, loved him with the most loyal devotion any husband could ever have?

Now, however. Now, his heart feels ridiculously broken, as if he were nothing more than a teenager again, with so much pain that it was too much for his body, clutching his mother for vain comfort and unable to explain why it hurt so much.

Shen Jiu isn't sure he can do this right now.

He stands up. Yingying, curious, opens one blue eye, a tiny guardian in the half-light from her plush bed and jumps up, rubbing his ankles as she scurries into the living room. Shen Jiu picks her up, scratching behind her ears, under her chin, until she lets out the sweetest purr, rubbing against him, wanting more. Shen Jiu sighs, holding her close. He knows how pathetic he must look—hugging a cat in the dark, a man-shaped ache holding something warm because the person he wants to hold is the one who broke him, but he can't help himself.

Because what can he really do when he wants Qi-ge to hug and comfort him, but it's Yue Qi who has hurt him so much now?

The room is quiet. He puts Yingying down on the counter, looking for her favorite treats. She starts giving her pitiful meows, as if Shen Jiu isn't going to grant all her requests without her

even having to meow. It's almost funny.

“Remember to drink more water,” he says, as if the cat could understand, while offering the open packet with a bit of the treat paste on the tip. “We don’t want to prick you and shave you again. Your fur looks so beautiful now.”

Yingying only purrs louder as she licks. She eats desperately, and Shen Jiu feels only mocking exasperation. As if he isn't feeding her the best quality food. He's even cooked exclusively for her, and yet, she behaves like an ungrateful glutton! He feels himself smiling, a silly grin that feels alien to his own face, as Yingying continues to purr, her purring competing with the sound of the shower until it shuts off, and in the gloomy apartment, Shen Jiu can only hear his heavy heartbeat against his chest and Yingying's sweet purring.

He isn't afraid to confront Yue Qi, but in truth, he doesn't want to either. He doesn't want to have to face him. He wants the Yue Qi who would surely have embraced him after such a chaotic experience, who would have been equally amazed and horrified by a palace and demons. He wants the Yue Qi who would have scoffed at how Yuan-di, of all people, ended up in such a *demented situation.* He wants the Yue Qi who would have held him close, equally worried, trying to understand, to know, to better comprehend the situation they were in. He wants the Yue Qi he thought he knew, who was unaware of a world where horrors went beyond anything they could have ever imagined, a Yue Qi who hadn't died a horrible death to reach the man he loves.

He wasn't sure if he would have cared much about not knowing anything. Yue Qi could have continued playing the fool for years, for the rest of their lives, and Shen Jiu would never have had to face the fact that for more than half his life, Yue Qi had *lied to him.*

Shen Jiu isn't sure he can forgive him right now.

On the entryway table, right next to his keys, his phone vibrates. The screen lights up and then goes dark. A new message.

Shen Jiu sighs. He tears open the rest of the treat packet into Yingying's bowl, scratching a little more behind his ears with nails aching from being bitten down to the roots. He feels as if he's asleep, possessed, his heart twisted by a full-body curse as he moves toward his phone. It's fully charged now, and—

Shen Jiu stares blankly at the screen for long moments, scanning each message and photo in descending order from the past few hours, ranging from apologies for bothering him to the sheer desperation only the pictures could convey. It's nearly eleven at night, and Yuan-di has been messaging him since *seven.*

With a resigned sigh and without hesitation, Shen Jiu takes his coat from the rack by the door, and barely managing to slip it on, grabs his keys. He doesn't leave a note. He doesn't have to give explanations; if he doesn't receive any, why should he?

He just slips on his shoes without bothering to tie the laces properly. He's sure *he must* look absolutely ridiculous, in his dark flannel pajamas, silk robe, and winter coat, showing off his shoes, and with his hair still oiled from an eight-hour hair treatment. He's also sure that if he

never cared what kind of bullshit rumors were made up about him in his life, he'll care even less now what his brother thinks, completely outnumbered by two tiny demon children who haven't stopped pushing, trying to bite, and yelling at each other ever since, apparently, his chaotic little nephew started viciously accusing his sister of trying to steal their dad's attention and love.

Who would have thought it, the little stowaway princess. Shen Jiu could only respect her desire to escape the suffering she called mother by any means necessary.

Shen Jiu sighs. *Good*. At least arriving to help will distract him enough from his existential misery, he supposes.

At least, he hopes that will be the case.

Chapter End Notes

SJ: *looking like a damn diva in a silk robe, glowing skin, freshly showered and lightly perfumed* Well, you can return this. It's what I was going to wear tonight
YQ: *opening the bag* ...nothing in here but lip gloss
SJ: :)
YQ: ...
SJ: Suffer

SJ: *is melodramatic and absolutely depressing in existentialism and drama*
SY: Hey, look, this baby demon needs someone to-
SJ: *getting in the car* I'll be there in 20'

Hey. HEY. I HAVE TO BE HONEST. I DIDN'T THINK WRITING FROM SHEN JIU'S POV WOULD BE SO EASY. I mean, I'm still not entirely sure if I've nailed it or not, but I'm at least 95% satisfied, and I think that's enough. I adore Shen Jiu. I have such a visceral affection for him that writing from his miserable little POV feels like picking at open wounds. My little messed-up meow meow. He hasn't done anything wrong in this life and has entered a possible divorce arc (there won't be any divorces here anyway, because these two jerks are the literal definition of "a kid could fix us" and I hate them for that/affectionate).

Also, I feel a little emotionally exposed writing from Shen Jiu's POV, hahaha, it's not as funny as it seems
Btw, I also was a little worried that it would be clear that it's Shen Jiu's POV because I'm WAY too used to writing from Shen Yuan's. So I reread it to edit it and it was like, "Haha, wooooow, who wrote this? Damn, dude, you make Shen Yuan look sane here," and I think I'm proud of it

Yue Qi is suffering and being miserable. He kind of deserves it :D

You know, I'm SO excited to write Shen Yuan from Shen Jiu's point of view, because all this time Shen Yuan is such an unreliable narrator that seeing him from an outside perspective will be DELICIOUS XD Between Shen Jiu the introspective narrator and Shen Yuan the unreliable narrator, honestly, I don't know what it says about me jumping from one to the other so comfortably XD

OH, ANYWAY, I HOPE YOU LIKED THE CHAPTER!!! Don't forget to kudo-comment-interact, and let's have fun together in the comments ;P We all know that Qijiu will end up together because I can't separate couples who deserve each other despite their big mistakes together, but we also know that I like to kick characters in the gut so they squirm from their mistakes and recognize them so they can grow as people. How do you think Yue Qi will redeem himself? :D
HUGS, KISSES, THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR JOINING ME ON THIS CHAOTIC JOURNEY!! See you (this Friday???? I think????)
See you soon!! :D

Chapter 36: Shen Jiu's Second Interlude

Chapter Notes

HAPPY HALLOWEEN :B This chapter has nothing to do with Halloween, but oh well, I hope you like it anyway lol
I'M REALLY NERVOUS ABOUT MY SURGERY, I'LL BE WORKING ON CHAPTERS AHEAD THESE DAYS. ANYWAY, I PLAN TO WRITE ONE AND HAVE IT READY (WITH AUTHOR'S NOTES AND EVERYTHING) FOR MY SISTER TO PUBLISH ON THE SAME TUESDAY I GET OUT OF SURGERY, SO YOU ALL KNOW THAT EVERYTHING WENT WELL!!!!

... I've also given in to temptation (fanarts) and made a Twitter/X!!! I hate Twitter and I hate Elon, but hey, there are so many beautiful artists there to whom I want to give more support

Chapter warnings: Shen Yuan™ and Shen Jiu™

Enjoy the chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At this hour of the morning, the building's corridors are wrapped in harsh shadows, the heavy silence breaking only as Shen Jiu approaches the door. He doesn't need to press his ear to the wall or get too close to the door to begin hearing children's shouts, punctuated by a weary, resigned sigh; anyone would think that Yuan-di, instead of two children, has brought an entire zoo of wild animals to his apartment.

Yuan-di opening the door as soon as he knocks is a sign of despair in itself. There are dark shadows under his eyes, the same deep marks of exhaustion that never seem to leave him, no matter how much rest he gets.

"Oh, God, you *actually* came," he says. He looks utterly miserable, and Shen Jiu rolls his eyes. He kicks off his shoes, taking off his coat only to throw it onto the hall table. If Yuan-di has a single complaint about him showing up in his pajamas at his apartment, he should probably avoid calling him at a time when normal people are asleep. "Look, I know it was a bit abrupt, and, uh, I know you have your own problems… well, pretty big ones right now, so…"

His Yuan-di shifts nervously. Between his nerves, the exhaustion consumes him like a malevolent force. Shen Jiu can't stop the nervous twitching of his eyelids when he sees him in clothes that clearly don't suit him, enormous fabrics hanging off him from every side. He won't ask—he won't pry into things he *doesn't* want to know, for his own *fragile* mental state.

“Can you get to the point?” he insists. If it were up to Yuan-di, he’d circle around a topic ten thousand times before addressing it. It’s as if, instead of seeing the enormous sphere floating before his eyes, he has to scrutinize every aspect surrounding it before noticing that all the aspects that make it up *actually* create a sphere. It’s not like his Shen Jiu could possibly glimpse how his mind works, but he can bet it’s utter chaos. It’s no wonder he gets along so well with that writer friend of his. “It’s past midnight. Where is that bastard, and why isn’t he taking care of *his* kids?”

It’s a question he could well ask in many circumstances. A visceral fury that doesn’t even belong to him, something that stirs like embers still smoldering among the ashes of an old fire. He's certain that if he blows any more in that direction, he'll burst into flames and take everything with him. Where was that imbecile, that beastly bastard, when Yuan-di pushed his health to the brink to care for the son he abandoned and nearly died in the hospital? Where was that repulsive beast when his children went through clear levels of physical and emotional neglect? Where was that horrible man when his son decided that crossing into a completely unknown world was better than staying in his own disastrous home? And under what pretext had he failed to notice it had happened *again*?

“He’s not here,” Yuan-di says, and Shen Jiu has to close his eyes and physically restrain himself from hitting something. How can he say it so casually? How can he let that bastard do whatever he pleases, however he pleases, and get away with it? “Look, yes, I know he’s not in your best opinion, but *he left* before we realized we had a stowaway, and then Airplane had to leave because he wanted to stop his landlord from trying to break into his apartment since he hadn’t seen any movement in many days and didn’t want him to rob him, and, *I know* you’re furious, but—”

“But,” and Shen Jiu cuts off that “*but*” as if holding the edge of a sword between his fingers. Yuan-di looks miserable, and not in a way that gives Shen Jiu pleasure to see. He looks wasted, exhausted, *sad.* With deep dark circles under his eyes and a pale face, Shen Jiu reaches out to check his temperature. *Yes*, he probably has a fever again. “He deliberately neglected himself more times than are *forgivable.* How could you…?”

“I’m not going to argue about this!” Shen Yuan cuts him off. His attempts to push him away are never painful. Shen Yuan is weak at his best; his greatest strength lies in the sharpness of his words, razor-sharp and far more lethal. Shen Jiu can attest to that. “Just *please.* Jiu-ge, seriously. I can’t handle this.”

Shen Jiu takes a deep breath. The air smells musty. It's clear that even if his ridiculous friend has stayed to look after his apartment, he hasn't done any cleaning. Shen Jiu guesses it’s hard to clean when both hands are busy in his enormous, damned demon boyfriend’s pants.

“Okay,” he agrees. “Explain the situation. And how can I help.”

As if the taut strings of a puppeteer were being cut, the tension gives way. Yuan-di's shoulders sink in immense relief. He moves, clutching his cane as if clinging to life; it's clear the pain isn't just in his muscles, but may be spreading to his back and neck, judging by the way he tenses his shoulders as he moves forward. He collapses onto the sofa like a rag doll, his breath trembling and broken before becoming deep, and even what seems to be deep hisses in his breath.

Yuan-di had always looked like the frail type who needed to be cared for. Yet, it wasn't unusual for him to be oblivious to his own fragility, or willfully ignorant of the rhythms of the illness that plagued his entire body. Shen Jiu surmised and believed he could make sense of it—after all, his Yuan-di had never known anything other than his current state. How could he possibly grasp how fragile he was if his own weakened state was still among the strongest he'd ever been? For someone who had spent half his childhood on hospital gurneys and half his adolescence in and out of one, being able to stay in a ward without daily nurses would be a jolt of courage and a false sense of being able to conquer the world.

When they were children, Shen Jiu believed Yuan-di could do anything he set his mind to. Time had done nothing but silence him with blows that could have knocked out his teeth. With growth came misdiagnoses, medications, the constant intake of different kinds of drugs until finally a combination worked. The mere fact that Yuan-di was alive was an absurd miracle, a gift from Heaven, a whim of fate. Even without getting too close, Shen Jiu could hear his wheezing breath and see how the blue veins painted his thin neck, how his knuckles were red and swollen, how his body leaned slightly to one side, instinctively avoiding pressure where it hurt the most.

“Binghe”—and the way Yuan-di pronounces that vile name makes his stomach turn—“he *had* to leave. He’s, uh, doing things. I don’t know, something to make sure the children are treated well. I think. I hope.” His brow furrows slightly, as if organizing his thoughts is physically difficult. He must be more feverish than he’s willing to admit to allow himself to take a fever reducer, if he hasn’t already, and his high temperature could be *worse*. “The fact is, well. Baoxian snuck in. The little princess?”

“I know who she is,” Shen Jiu snorts. As if his attention span were shorter than that of a ten-year-old and he couldn't even remember a couple of names. “She got away. When did that happen?”

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” and from the way Shen Yuan says it, it’s clear that *it does* matter. Shen Jiu would inquire. “So, Airplane had to leave, and everything was fine for about an hour or two. We had dinner, and the kids watched a movie, and then I ran a bath for Baoxian and asked Chengle to lend her some pajamas. Then Chengle started to, uh…”

“Behaving like a child with emotional dependency issues and latent abandonment trauma?” Shen Jiu offers. Yuan-di rolls his eyes, as if that weren't exactly how his son behaved most of the time. Doesn't he see it? Having found a safe haven in Shen Yuan, Chengle is *possessive.* More so than any child, but more so than any *healthy child* should be. Looking back, though, Shen Jiu is glad he didn't suggest taking the boy to therapy; not because his nephew doesn't need it, but because it's clear no child therapist could accept the brat's overactive *imagination* regarding beasts, demons, cultivators, and harem politics as normal. And at least five other siblings are also abused and neglected.

“I guess he’s just overwhelmed,” Shen Yuan complains. He rubs his hand wearily against his face. His bandaged hand remains tense in his lap; even if Mu-shi—?!?!!— the doctor Mu kept repeating that it was just a sprained wrist, the swelling hadn’t gone down in the slightest. A doctor’s visit and some X-rays *might* be a good idea… “Chengle wanted to get back to the

apartment and his normal life. And now Baoxian is here, and he hadn't considered her part of, well, his normal life."

"She's his sister," Shen Jiu remarks, though even he finds it ridiculous. He's seen those children getting along *somewhat*, playing together, squeezing each other as if they loved one another, but who's to say they really do? Even if *they should*, even if they're just children, what the hell does he know about the absurd politics within a disgusting harem? What is he supposed to have to say about an emperor's children and that horde of wives?

"Yeah, well, they didn't get along before," Shen Yuan sighs deeply. His breath is fragile, slipping through his fingers like grains of sand. "It's just… Chengle is too offended. They shouted at each other, and, well, I think they *almost* bit each other. And every time I try to get close to Baoxian, it gets worse. I don't want to break Chengle's heart, but that girl *needs* comfort, and…"

"Fine," Shen Jiu clicks his tongue. He understood the situation quite clearly now, without Yuan-di beating around the bush. Why couldn't he just ask for what he needed? At least in that respect, Mingsu was a good brother to talk to. No beating around the bush: he specified exactly what he wanted, in what timeframe, with precise details, and Shen Jiu could easily adapt to that. What was Yuan-di's need to make it *so* complicated? "Go calm that son of yours down. Where's Baoxian?"

"In the bathroom," Shen Yuan says, standing up. Shen Jiu clenches his hands behind his back, absolutely avoiding offering a hand to help him. At this point, it's almost instinctive; as always, Yuan-di looks fragile, as if a blizzard could knock him over, even though he has regained some of the weight he had before his hospitalization. "And, uh. Thank you. I know it's a… difficult time…"

"Yeah, well, I should be married so I can get a divorce first," Shen Jiu says, needing to spice things up with a bit of sarcasm, because how else can he live with it? Licking his wounds, scratching at the itch that won't stop—hasn't he done too much of that already? Right now, all he has left is a bit of crude, acidic black humor, even if Yuan-di tilts his head with a strange grimace, as if he's too dazed to fully understand his words. "And take that temperature. It must be high."

"I'm fine," Shen Yuan says, obviously lying. "I'll go with Chengle."

His steps fall heavy and slow, fading into the silence as they reach the room. Shen Jiu exhales a long, weary sigh as soon as he hears Chengle's spoiled, whiny voice—followed by a few soft words from Yuan-di—before continuing down the same corridor toward the bathroom door. There's no sound inside, but what could he possibly hear? Crying, running water? Which would be more dangerous—to hear something, or to hear nothing at all?

Shen Jiu strikes. He does it twice every few moments, his knuckles tapping insistently but not roughly against the wooden door, until he gets a response.

"There's Nobody here," comes a tiny voice from within, so small it almost fades into the wood. Despite the silliness of the situation, Shen Jiu can't help but smile.

“Well, Nobody,” Shen Jiu says simply, listening intently for any kind of reaction, “I hope Nobody isn’t doing anything wrong. Or crying. Can you imagine if, besides Chengle, there was another child crying? The apartment would flood twice as fast, and we’d have to swim out.”

“That would be ugly,” the girl’s voice says from inside. Her tiny voice is fragile, ethereal. “This one can’t swim. There are no lakes in the underground palace. Mother doesn’t want to take me outside.”

“Mnh,” Shen Jiu hums. He sits down gently against the door, trying to hear something else coming from the bathroom—not that he has particularly good hearing after years of noise pollution and too much visual kei during his teenage years, but he can make an effort even if it doesn't work. “Well, I will. If Chengle floods the apartment with all his tears, I promise I'll get you out. What do you say?”

“That… would be good,” the little girl’s voice trailed off slightly. Shen Jiu waited patiently until she spoke again. His efforts and patience, as always, were briefly rewarded with a noise behind the door. “You’re Jiu-ge, right?”

“Am I that easy to forget?” he asks, just to keep the girl talking. He’s not entirely sure he can pinpoint where she is. He doesn’t think she’s in immediate danger, but he doesn’t want the door to push the girl when he tries to open it, should something happen.

The little princess lets out a faint laugh from behind the door; the sound is smooth, slightly in the air, a nervous spark rather than genuine amusement. She immediately replies, “No, that’s not it. But Jiu-ge had already left when this one arrived.”

Shen Jiu sighs. “It’s been a difficult day,” he explains, and tries hard not to think, not to feel, not to let the pain spreading against his chest invade his ribs, his lungs, and burn against his throat. “If I had known you were coming, I would have stayed,” he lies. He has no qualms about lying, because it’s the kind of lie children sometimes need to hear to find a little comfort in a tense situation.

There is silence on the other side of the door. Then, a small sound, and something seems to unlock.

“Won’t Jiu-ge be angry?” the small voice asks from the slightly ajar door. Shen Jiu moves slowly, trying to avoid any sudden movement that might cause the girl to slam the door in his face—it’s not as if he can’t somehow understand the ruthless need to isolate oneself, to shut oneself away, to carve out a safe little corner of the world. He thinks the poor brat must be having the worst time because of her spoiled brother; Shen Jiu is almost grateful that, among the considerable options he could have called (his pathetic friend and any of the other members of his family), Yuan-di turned to him for help. “This one… did something bad.”

“I don’t think anything you’ve done is ba-…”

The door bursts open. The first thing Shen Jiu sees on the linoleum floor are two tiny feet wrapped in knitted booties, bright against the pale tiles. From the vibrant color and the quality of the wool, he's certain it was a gift from his mother for Chengle. He would

recognize the slightly untidy stitches at the end, his mother, tired of sitting around doing nothing, hurrying to finish it.

The second thing he notices is the white linoleum, now drowned beneath dark, heavy clumps of hair.

"*Bad*," the girl repeats, wearing pajamas with clouds and sheep, now free of every single jewel. She looks weightless, like a little bird in the middle of molting. She doesn't gleam with jewels or gold; there are no pearls or crystals. Her ears are bare without the heavy pearls, her hands look small and fragile without all the rings, and, most importantly, her head has less than half its hair. Where once there was long, dark, wavy hair, decorated with a multitude of crystal flowers and combs with jade beads, now her hair is practically sawed off in a haphazard fashion, with clumps of all lengths falling above her shoulders.

Shen Jiu watches her with bewildered surprise. The girl's eyes are swollen, but there are no signs of crying on her face. Her lips are pressed tightly together in a grimace, her small body trembling as if she's been caught in a storm. Adrenaline, Shen Jiu supposes.

"It's not *bad*," Shen Jiu lies, short of saying it's an absolute disaster. He looks more carefully at any space where the girl might have left some kind of scissors; he's not sure the girl is tall enough to reach the scissors in the first-aid kit, *or* the kit itself in the first-aid kit. Doesn't Yuan-di keep it higher to prevent that brat Chengle from touching things he shouldn't? "It's a bold decision," he finally says; after all, the girl deserves the truth. "And what led the little princess to decide this?"

Little Baoxian presses her lips together. On her face, the round, soft face of a child, there's a stubborn grimace that can only come from her damned paternal side of the family. Her small eyebrows are furrowed, and as the seconds stretch out as the little girl deliberates what to say, Shen Jiu notices even more that there are no scissors on any surface.

Observing closely how the girl's nails suddenly look a little longer, like tiny claws, Shen Jiu is pretty sure how the little princess has managed to lose half of her hair.

"This one has decided," she says, her voice tight around every word, her figure tense and firm, "to renounce her honor."

…Did they watch a movie? That's what Yuan-di had said. Shen Jiu was absolutely certain which movie they watched without even asking.

"Honor?" he asks, trying to keep his mouth from twisting into any kind of expression. He shouldn't show the girl that there's a reaction to it. In fact, he shouldn't show any kind of negative reaction to such a decision. He can't guess, but he's all too certain that, even though current customs have relaxed enough, hair still bears the weight of legacy—filial duty braided into every strand and are still supremely important to her.

She doesn't seem regretful or hesitant, as small as a primrose peeking through at the beginning of spring, and yet, with the strongest stem and leaves.

“Yes,” Baoxian said, her voice a little firmer. She was strong, Shen Jiu had to admit. From the start, he hadn't doubted that there was a strange strength within her, a determination that seemed to push harder than her upbringing and teachings. A girl born for rebellion, her strength hidden beneath the guise of a delicate petal, swept by winds far stronger than herself. “Since this one no longer possesses honor, Baoxian is no longer a princess. And if Baoxian is not a princess, then this one doesn't have to return to the palace.”

The little girl raises her chin. Ironclad, unwavering determination burns in her eyes, along with tears she doesn't shed. Her small face is covered in pink spots, her breathing almost labored. As if struck by a wave, with the fury of a storm, Shen Jiu can do nothing but stare at the little girl standing amidst a mass of her hair, and feel that the force within that tiny being could completely overwhelm him.

“And where does little Baoxian plan to stay?” Shen Jiu asks, crossing his arms over his chest. She wrings her hands slightly, nervous gestures that don't make her any less brave, but do rewrite the impulsiveness of her actions. “A princess who is no longer a princess, a palace that is no longer a home. Do you want to stay with your brother and his Baba? I don't think there's a room for you here.”

He doesn't say it maliciously, as he's sure they might accuse him of. It's a plain, unvarnished truth, a reality the girl had better face as soon as possible. Her hair is a ragged mess, shapeless and graceless—where once it might have been something honorable, it's now nothing more than a chaotic jumble that has stripped her of her last vestiges of luxury more than if she'd been robbed of her silks, more than being without her jewels has done to her.

Even at that age, she's made a decision that could haunt her for the rest of her life. While some—his little brother, probably—might want to overprotect her, wrap her in a blanket and comfort her making her shed tears with overly gentle words and tender caresses, tell her her hair looks good, that she doesn't need to part with anything to start over, *well,* yes. Emotions are a sensitive and necessary thing, in theory, but looking back, it's essential that the girl understands, sooner rather than later, that what she's done is *irreversible.*

“This one has no problem not staying here,” she says, letting go of the sleeve she’s been clutching. Her small body swells with a deep breath, and still as if ready to attack if necessary, she says, “Cheng-di said this one wanted to steal his Baba, but that’s *not true*. Noble Consort Shen” and, for Shen Jiu’s sanity, what little he has left, he tries to ignore that stupid title while his ears ring and his stomach churns with the most visceral disgust. “is kind, Liang-er was right about that. But he’s Cheng-di’s Baba. This one wouldn’t steal him. This one couldn’t steal any more happiness from Cheng-di than she already has with Zuo-ge. It wouldn’t be fair, and my heart would never find peace.”

Shen Jiu can do nothing but silently observe her at first. He notices her firm posture, her straight back, how one of the strands doesn't even seem to have been cut properly. She's surrounded by enough hair to make at least a full wig. Not only had her hair been waist-length, but thick, and now practically all of it rests in dark clumps like cracks on the floor.

Finally, with a resigned sigh, he kneels to pick up one of the strands. It looks particularly badly cut, practically sawed off. He can imagine the girl pulling at the hair and, not caring for aesthetics for a second, using those tiny claws to saw through it. He supposes, with a touch of

bitterness, that it must have been painful—though he's not entirely sure if it was physically or emotionally.

“You did it all by yourself, didn’t you?” he asks, more to clear up his doubt. On one knee, he’s face to face with the girl, who nods her head with quick firmness. More hair falls with that movement, spilling like the last drops of rain that haven’t quite finished falling after a storm.

His dark eyes shine with satisfaction.

“With my claws,” she says, extending her hand toward him. The small nails are different from the claws Shen Jiu has seen on the other brat or even on Chengle; when she extends them, they aren't black, but the color of her nails, spreading out in the same way Yingying spreads hers to knead the cushions, sharp little claws on small hands. Shen Jiu lets go of her hair and extends his hand, letting the girl place her fingers on it, examining it carefully.

“They look *extremely dangerous*,” he admits, and the girl, as if she’d received the most exhilarating compliment, lets a wide smile spread across her face. Her small, pearly teeth have two tiny fangs sharper than the others, a small detail that, between her bowed head and her little grimaces as she spoke, Shen Jiu hadn’t been able to notice. “My, my. Look at you, you really are a little beast.”

“Am I?” she asks, tilting her head, eyes gleaming with something wild and bright. Her eyes burn, her face is bright pink. A spring flower revealing its true colors, a wild, bestial joy gnawing at a tiny face full of teeth, clawed hands, and hair sawed by desperation. “I like that.”

“*Of course*,” Shen Jiu snorts, a little sarcastically. He stands up, brushing the hair from his knees. More of the girl’s hair keeps falling, and Shen Jiu, with a heavy weight of resignation on his shoulders, has to sigh. She looks like Yingying when she’s shedding, leaving hair everywhere. “So what does the little runaway beast plan to do now?”

The girl doesn't look at him with horror, nor with fear. Shen Jiu is sure that he could keep calling her little nicknames that would infuriate Yuan-di and she would be puffing herself up like a glamorous peacock, showing how good they look on her.

“No,” she says, with a simplicity that could only be childlike. “But if Cheng-di and all his tears could survive in this world, Baoxian can too. Cheng-di is faster and stronger, but Cheng-di’s mother is better than mine. My heart is stronger.”

Shen Jiu pauses for a moment, just staring at her. He feels as if he's being drenched in her tiny presence, her disheveled hair, her determined little face, the stubborn expression in her eyes, the smirk of her mouth. Nothing about the courage in her face or the strength in her eyes should belong to someone so small.

She resonates against him in a way that Shen Jiu feels against the flesh, the blood, and the air he breathes.

“You’re a cheeky girl,” he says, feeling a touch of affectionate exasperation, the same kind of thrill he gets when Meimei decides to run away to another country overnight without even a word. Baoxian has a mischievous little smile on his face. “How old are you?”

“This one turned nine in the fall,” Baoxian replies, with absurd childlike simplicity. “Baoxian is the third child and first daughter of Father Emperor, after Zuo-ge and An-ge.”

Shen Jiu stares at the little girl for a moment that, against his ragged breath, feels like an eternity. Without further hesitation, he reaches for his phone, ignoring Yue Qi's missed messages and calls, and opens Xiaohongshu. A quick search reveals an almost overwhelming number of different short haircuts. Hopefully, they'll all be shorter than the small hair he has left to work with.

“Here,” Shen Jiu says, offering the phone to the girl. She retracts her claws, revealing only small, pale nails as she holds the phone with extreme care. She squints at the brightness, and Shen Jiu quickly lowers it—his eyes aren't what they used to be, sadly, and he can't afford luxuries like having the brightness at 0%. “Move your finger like this… gently. Don't press too hard, just… like this…”

A couple of tries later, Baoxian is searching, scanning the pictures with a small grimace of surprise. Her eyebrows are raised, her mouth in a tiny, surprised 'o'. She seems amazed by everything: cuts, colors, shapes, hairstyles. Only when he lets her soak up the novelty a little does Shen Jiu open the bathroom cabinet drawers, grimacing at the pile of reddish and dark-colored clothes until he finds the first-aid kit. And right there, scissors.

“Good,” he says, opening and closing the scissors. He moves the chair from inside the bathtub to outside, positioning the little girl in front of it so she can stand and look herself in the mirror. He expects some kind of horrified expression at the sight of such a mess on her head, but as always, the little princess only surprises him, grinning from ear to ear. “Now, tell me what kind of hair you want. I can’t promise it will be the same, but I’ll do my best.”

Baoxian alternates between looking at his phone and in the mirror. Her head bobs up and down, as if she's visualizing different styles and cuts and thinking about how they'd look on her. Shen Jiu takes the opportunity to close the door, searching for a towel to put over the girl's shoulders. It's not as if her hair hasn't already fallen all over her clothes, but at least it's an average hair salon experience.

“*Oh*,” and sure enough, the girl has to point out the only haircut that looks like a giant hedgehog. Shen Jiu is absolutely certain the effect will be even wilder with the wavy texture of her hair, an absolute chaos of wild hair all around her head, but who is he to judge a girl’s tastes? “I like this one. Looks like a short-haired beast.”

Shen Jiu feels that the laughter that escapes with his breath is something that almost springs from his soul.

“*Short-haired beast*” he echoes, surprise and reluctant amusement burning in his chest. “All right, little beast. If you move, I won’t be responsible for how awful it gets.”

Those might not be the best words to say, because during every moment of the haircut, the girl seems to tremble and shake as if a fierce storm were raging inside her.

She also smiles as if she's enjoying every second.

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It's nearly one in the morning when Yuan-di knocks on the bathroom door.

“Is everything okay over there?” he asks. Shen Jiu has already swept up most of the hair, though he knows that a few stray strands, as unruly as bad decisions, will only disappear when a Roomba or a more patient assistant than he takes pity on the mess. Not that he usually cleans his apartment, after all; how could he when Qi-ge is the most enthusiastic about Shen Jiu shouldn’t lift a finger? “Chengle’s already asleep. God, he was way *too* tired. He didn’t take a nap today with all that playing, our arrival at the apartment wasn’t the *smoothest*, and…”

Shen Jiu opens the door, and his brother breaks down mid-sentence, as if the air itself had decided to punish him for speaking too much. His mouth makes an absurd squeaking sound, as if his language had rusted in his throat. Pale, as pale as if he'd seen a terrifying ghost, his eyes wild behind crooked glasses, Shen Jiu can't even stop himself from clapping right in front of his face to swat him away.

“Wh-…?” and his normally eloquent brother is left speechless, choked by his own tongue. Finally, as if each word were demanding too much of his brain, Yuan-di manages to utter, “What is *that*?”

Shen Jiu glances briefly at Baoxian; he has done what he could with a pair of scissors ill-suited for the task and with no skill dealing with curly hair other than his brief experience taking care of his unruly nephew, but his skills were never those of a professional stylist and it is something that anyone could notice at a glance.

At least the small fringe on her forehead is neat.

“A little girl,” he replies with all the calm. “Your sense of observation is still prodigious, I see.”

Shen Yuan brings a hand to his face. He casually rubs half his face, and with only a raised eyebrow, Shen Jiu notices his hand *is trembling*. Oh, has he never seen a girl with short hair? Is it so ridiculous, in those silly gender roles society drilled into his damned brother, to imagine a girl with a nice pixie cut? Yes, Shen Jiu isn't nearly talented with scissors, but they could give it a better shape once it's grown out a bit in a proper salon, and honestly—

Yuan-di tugs at his wrist. The tugs don't force him to move, barely strong, but Shen Jiu follows him down the hall. The room is silent, the television having turned off on its own some time ago. It's clear they've tried to clean, and it's clear the cleaning didn't stop there: a futile attempt to try.

“You cut her hair,” Shen Yuan hisses, his voice so strangled it sounds like he’s choking. If Shen Jiu didn’t already know how dramatic Yuan-di could be, he might have been *worried*. He just crosses his arms, waiting to see what level of drama his brother will unleash now. “You-… I can’t *believe it.* Jiu-ge, for the love of-… what’s *wrong* with you?”

Shen Jiu rolls his eyes. Before he can even say anything, Shen Yuan interrupts him, his voice choked. He seems to want to scream through whispers, as if he wants to grab him by the arms and shake him, but at the same time avoid raising his voice. An absurd, trembling contradiction in an absurd, trembling man.

“Why would you do something like that? God, why would you involve *her* in some ridiculous revenge of yours?” he hisses, and Shen Jiu takes a step back, realizing with utter horror the exact reason why his damned brother is losing his temper. “She’s just a *child.* What did she ever do to you? Yes, I *understand* you want to spite Binghe, but—”

Laughter escapes him like a gasp from his gut. Shen Yuan watches, his expression contorted, his face horrified. He looks no less frail than when he left the hospital, and it is that exhausted face, the sickly face of the brother he has dedicated half his life to caring for, that suddenly seems to plunge daggers into his side. Unable to control his temper, unable to control his tongue. Yuan-di—no matter how much he does for him—will always see his brother as the worst kind of scum.

Why would he be wrong, really?

“Of all the possibilities,” he huffs, annoyed, “do you think I would do that because of her *father*?”

“Why else?!” Shen Yuan raises his voice only slightly; his throat seems to crack, almost hysterical. His eyes are bloodshot with exhaustion, dark circles under them, and his hand holding the cane trembles constantly. He seems fragile, on the verge of collapse. If Shen Jiu were to give him even a single touch on the shoulder, he wouldn't be surprised if he fell under the weight of his own weariness. “What's wrong with you? Why would you do this to her—”

“It wasn’t Jiu-ge!”

Shen Jiu turns his head. Standing there, her two little hands curled into fists at her sides, her fierce eyes framed by a tiny frown. Her hair is full of messy swirls pointing in all directions, like burnt cotton candy, and she is the most adorable little girl Shen Jiu has ever seen.

“This Baoxian decided to do it alone,” the girl says, her words firm. She looks tiny, defending her decision as if it were a precious new treasure she clutches to her chest. “This Baoxian has renounced her honor. Without honor, she will never be a princess again. If this one isn’t a princess, this one won’t have to return to the palace! Never. *Never*!”

She is no flower bud, but a blazing fire; something burning where before there were only nascent flames, sparks anxiously crackling. Shen Jiu observes the gentle blaze of a little girl who finally stops asking permission to exist. It's a stark contrast to Chengle—as far as Shen Jiu could see, the boy arrived like a wild animal, molded by care and attention until he shed the wolf's skin that disguised him, revealing his tender heart, the innocence of his laughter,

the fear in his abandonment-ridden spirit. This girl is more like a little wolf who had been hiding, head bowed, in a soft, white lamb's skin, which she didn't hesitate for a moment to discard when she found something better.

Like a flame, Shen Jiu's heart burns with every beat against his chest. Ah, truly, isn't she a magnificent little beast? Without tears or writhing for affection, emerging in the flailing of a drowning man. Fleeing from a place she didn't consider home, no matter how much satisfaction it provided, tearing away the faithful bond with her ancestors at the slightest lapse. Isn't she as strong as the last tree standing after a hurricane?

Shen Yuan lets out a sigh so deep it seems as if he's disintegrating beneath him. His shoulders sag with a pull that exposes the bones and tendons of his neck. Shen Jiu sees him, his eyes sunken, the way he seems to be devising five different absurd and ridiculous plans for how to deal with the situation instead of facing it head-on. Yet Shen Jiu *sees him.* He sees him, with his swollen knuckles, his parched lips, his fevered eyes. His breathing is still ragged, his face exuding such exhaustion that it looks as if he hasn't slept in days, and in the subtle grimace of his mouth, every movement reveals only pain.

Shen Jiu knows his brother well enough to see he can barely handle Chengle, and yet he pretends to play the martyr with the weight of two worlds on his frail back. What noble, pitiful foolishness. Only his brother's love for that child keeps him standing and hasn't caused him to collapse or go completely insane, if he isn't already. His Yuan-di will never accept how much help he needs, will never accept that his own standard of well-being is not well by the standard of anyone who doesn't have his same difficulties, and even less will he accept that he can't handle Baoxian.

He could almost picture it. It wasn't a pretty scene: with the awful father absent, disappearing to father more children or whatever that jerk was up to, Yuan-di wouldn't be long in pushing his luck to take care of the two brats. A child like Chengle, who any doctor could easily put on ADHD stimulants, had already been an absolute challenge for someone like Shen Yuan. How would his stupid, fragile, sickly Yuan-di ever deal with two children who couldn't be in the same room for too long without starting to hurt each other? Intentionally or not, that damned brat Chengle was unstable enough and his sister impulsive enough that *nothing* was bound to go right.

A second hospitalization in such a short time was never a good sign for Yuan-di.

“Doesn’t Noble Consort Shen like it?” Baoxian asks. Shen Yuan looks even sicker, and only with a little relief can Shen Jiu almost relax that the stupid title displeases his brother nearly as much as he does. “This one thinks it looks *great.* Now, Baoxian looks like a short-haired beast. They’re *strong*. And they have lots of sharp teeth. They bite and hunt beasts twice their size. This one… likes them a lot. To be a short-haired beast, it would be an honor.”

Yuan-di exhales with a pause. His chest trembles, and after a fragile moment of concern, Shen Jiu notices that he is just… laughing.

“I understand,” he says, and the relief he pushes back at those words is almost an insult. “*Wow*. A short-haired beast, who would have thought. It suits you, eh, to be one. But those things eat a lot of meat. You’ll have to eat a lot of meat, then.”

“This one will do it!” she says, and she hasn’t even finished speaking when a fierce yawn surprises her. She covers her mouth, but tears well up in the corners of her small eyes. Shen Jiu isn’t surprised. With all the adrenaline fading, it’s past the one in the morning, and whether she’s nine or not, no nine-year-old should be in bed past ten at night.

“Uh,” Shen Yuan says nervously. “Well, can you stay on the sofa?” he asks, tense. He doesn’t seem comfortable in his own space, or even in his own head, as if he doesn’t know what to say or how to move. Shen Jiu snorts; he can’t even feel sorry for him.

“Take a fever reducer,” he orders. He doesn’t even need to tell him to check his temperature, because it’s obvious the fever has returned. “I’ll take her. I’m not letting her sleep on the sofa. She’s a princess, for heaven’s sake. She needs a proper bed.”

“I’m not a princess anymore,” she protests. Still, when Shen Jiu reaches out his hand, the little girl happily runs toward him. Her knitted booties are so adorably clumsy she almost skates across the floor to him.

Shen Jiu shakes the freshly cut hair between his fingers. A few strands flutter out, floating to the floor—that must be the Roomba's and Shen Yuan's cleaning lady's problem, he supposes, with a touch of malice.

“If you’re going to stay in this world, little beast, you’ll have to learn a lot,” he says, bending down to pick her up. She doesn’t even resist or protest, clinging tightly to the fabric of his silk robe with her little fingers. Shen Jiu puts on his shoes and picks up his coat to place it over the girl’s shoulders. “As long as it still gets you things, you’re a princess.”

Shen Yuan has a tired grimace. “Okay, *okay*. Do whatever you want. I’ll let you know when —”

“Don’t do it,” Shen Jiu interrupts. Is Shen Yuan deaf, or has the fever caused his poor, functioning neurons to stop behaving cooperatively? The girl said she doesn’t want to leave. What does it matter if her father returns? If the girl doesn’t want to leave, *she won’t.* “I’ll send you your check-up appointment times tomorrow. You either go, or *I’ll make you go.* And I’ll make sure you get a full blood test.*”*

With his final veiled threat, Shen Jiu leaves his brother's apartment behind. The hallways remain just as silent, and through the wide window at the end of the corridor, the city lights shimmer in a hazy mist. Shen Jiu rubs the girl's back over his coat, which hangs from her shoulders like a blanket.

“If Father Emperor comes looking for me, can we trick him?” the little girl asks. Her eyes are curious as they reach the elevator, peering into the large mirrors. Shen Jiu is certain Yuan-di has been exaggerating—honestly, Baoxian’s hair didn’t turn out *so badly* as to warrant such a shock. “Like Mulan did to join the army. I can dress as a boy. And Father Emperor won’t know it’s me.”

“I’m not sure it’ll work,” Shen Jiu admitted. After all, trick that beast? No way. Not that he didn’t think he deserved it, or that his tiny brain could tell the difference between a child who was his and one who wasn’t, given how little he probably saw them between tending a harem

and doing whatever stupid emperor nonsense. Ugh. Just thinking of him made his stomach twist, disgust blooming like bile. “But we could try.”

“Can I have pants?” Baoxian asks. It doesn’t sound like the kind of question a child asks to get something, but rather a *genuine question*, as if she’s assessing whether such things are within her reach. “And shoes like Cheng-di’s?”

“Sneakers?” Shen Jiu asks, raising an eyebrow. The girl nods. She yawns again, but doesn’t seem to succumb to sleep as Shen Jiu had hoped when he picked her up. “You know what, you little beast? Yes. I’ll get you sneakers. With *lights*.”

Shen Jiu likes to assume that the fascination with bright lights is something inherent to age, time period, or whether it's a child from the mid-2000s or a little demon princess. Leaving the elevator and the building behind isn't difficult. The little creature in his arms yawns once, twice, three more times, but with fascinated eyes taking in the snowy city around her, she doesn't even seem ready to sleep. Quite a change, Shen Jiu supposes; each building sparkles with hundreds of lights, and to eyes without astigmatism it should be a much more enjoyable sight.

With her seatbelt fastened, and only when they've gone halfway to the apartment, Baoxian has truly fallen into a deep sleep. She has a soft snore that's easily masked by the purr of his car's engine, and Shen Jiu has to be careful not to glance at her at every stoplight.

Once he's parked in the underground garage of his building, Shen Jiu turns off the engine and checks his phone screen. It's one thirty in the morning, and Qi-ge's last missed call was seven minutes ago. Shen Jiu snorts a laugh.

He calls.

“Xiao J-…” Yue Qi answers at the first ring, the despair that covers his voice so fierce it almost shatters his eardrums.

“Shut up,” Shen Jiu says, and Yue Qi immediately does. “Put the sheets in the child’s bedroom.”

Yue Qi hesitates before answering; the silence on the other end of the line is tense and harsh, and Shen Jiu is on the verge of hanging up, fed up, when Yue Qi asks, “Is Xiao Yuan okay? Chengle…?”

“It’s not Chengle,” Shen Jiu says firmly. The little girl is asleep, covered with his coat. No matter how much he’s heated the car, the air outside and in the parking lot is always freezing. Catching a cold is never an option, but letting a brat catch one for him is out of the question. “Her name is Baoxian, and we’re *keeping her*.”

Chapter End Notes

SJ: *looking at LBG* Beast (derogatory)
SJ: *looking at Baoxian* Little beast (affectionate)

YQ: *pacing the walls of worry*
SJ: *bringing a little girl like a cat that's stolen a kitten from another litter* Look at her, cherish her, she's ours now

SECOND SHEN JIU INTERLUDE!!!! GUYS, THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR TELLING ME I WAS RIGHT ABOUT SHEN JIU POV. IT'S ALWAYS NICE TO KNOW THAT MY DEAR SCUM VILLAIN AND I HAVE THE SAME LEVEL OF EMOTIONAL TRAUMA /hj
That's 3 Shen Jiu interludes, and we'll be returning to our regular Shen Yuan and Bingyuan programming. Does this mean there won't be any more Shen Jiu interludes?
No, it does mean that at some point I'll do Qijiu extras, because just the image of Yue Qi in 2000s fashion picking up high school kid Shen Jiu in his car, driving off to some secluded spot to make out while listening to music on the radio, really hit me hard. SOMEDAY. PROBABLY. THEY'LL GET THEIR OWN EXTRAS. I'm not sure when, but, uh, trust me, I'll do it /eventually/
I was just sure that Shen Jiu's child abduction would be way more dramatic narrated from his melodramatic little mind (plus, Qijiu angst... yeah, that won me over)

I want you to picture Baoxian's haircut as someone trying to do Alice Cullen's Twilight haircut, but with waves and thick hair. And with scissors that aren't meant for cutting hair. And made by a person with zero knowledge of how to properly cut hair. I want you to understand that the horrified reaction to her hair IS NORMAL AND COMPLETELY JUSTIFIED :D
Welcome home, short-haired beast :3 Congratulations on your adoption!!!

MWAH, THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING!!!! I HOPE YOU LIKED THE CHAPTER! :D I REALLY ENJOYED WRITING IT. OH, MY LITTLE MEOW MEOW IS HAVING TOO MANY MELODRAMATIC EMOTIONS AND NOW A DAUGHTER. HIS LIFE IS GOING TO BE TURNED MELODRAMATICLY UPSIDE DOWN HEHEHEHEHE
You know it!!!! Kudo-comment-interaction, we can have fun together in the comments ;D Yes, I won't go blind, it's a routine operation, I promise (and who was the bastard -affectionate- who ask me who traumatized me enough to write SJ so well? DUDE, YOU LEFT THAT ANONYMOUSLY ON TUMBLR, I WILL FIND YOU AND *interference noises* /j)
TRICK OR TREAT, BIG HUGS AND SEE YOU SOON!! :3

Chapter 37: Shen Jiu's Third Interlude

Chapter Notes

> If you're seeing this, IT MEANS I CAN SEE TOO AND MY SURGERY WENT WELL!!! Anyway, well, my sister is the one posting it right now, I'll just get everything ready in drafts for her to do her thing :P Say hi to her and be really weird in the comments because she'll be reading them all in the meantime ;D
>
> Chapter warnings: Shen Jiu past™, beginnings of a panic attack, slight depersonalization
>
> Enjoy the chapter!! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The apartment is dimly lit, the low lights barely managing to dispel any of the shadows in the corners so as not to wake Baoxian. As soon as he closes the door behind him, a soft click enclosing them in their own world, Yue Qi lets out a muffled sound almost like a dog that's been kicked.

“What happened to her?” Yue Qi asks. Shen Jiu ignores him, walking past. The austere walls crumble the moment he enters the child's room—a silly dream, he’d told Yue Qi, but a dream nonetheless. The creamy walls, the soft curtains, the light wood. There’s a strange satisfaction in his stomach; he’d been looking for a boy or a girl, then, not that he’d decorated or bought anything specifically for any gender role. Soft greens, some pale yellows, gentle oranges. Soothing, homey colors. The colors of a happy child.

Yue Qi has laid out the sheets, a blanket, and a soft comforter. Nothing smells musty or like mothballs. Shen Jiu wonders, with a pang that strikes him from his ribs and shakes him like an earthquake, how many times that great fool Yue Qi has washed the sheets and blankets, hoping everything will be perfect for the day a child comes to occupy that room and keep it.

Shen Jiu settles her in; the girl collapses onto the mattress like a dead weight, a sleep so heavy it might be alarming if it weren't for the low snoring and the movement of her body with each breath. He supposes they'll have to change the sheets tomorrow, after all—they'll be full of all the hair that hasn't finished falling out until she takes a good shower.

“We’re keeping her,” Shen Jiu repeats. What else does he have to explain? Why does *he* have to explain? He covers Baoxian with the sheet and comforter, and the girl just tilts her head further down the pillow, letting out another soft snore. “She’s nine, her birthday is… sometime after mid-September. She likes dinosaurs. Maybe we could get her a Chihuahua or a Sphynx cat. People say animals help children develop responsibility, especially between the ages of nine and eleven…”

“Xiao Jiu,” Yue Qi’s voice cuts through him like a knife. Shen Jiu swattes him away, backing off. Baoxian doesn’t stir, comfortable between the soft bed and the blankets that smell of fabric softener, her hair a short, wild, dark halo around her head. Shen Jiu keeps that image locked in his mind as he moves through the darkness to his room. “Where did you bring her from? Is she…?”

“Oh, *of course*,” and the words escape him almost uncontrollably, like poison between his teeth. The room is in the shadows, and even Yingying isn't lying at the foot of the bed, which remains exactly as Shen Jiu left it. “Am I supposed to give explanations here? How curious. I would have expected otherwise.”

Evading Yue Qi is easy, on any given day. It isn't, of course, an ordinary day, because Yue Qi won't let go, holding his wrists in a firm grip. It isn't painful, but still, Shen Jiu is tempted to slip away from him and pretend—to feign pain, to squirm, to look at him fearfully. Oh, *how* Yue Qi could suffer over something as simple as that, how the guilt would devastate him.

But Shen Jiu is too tired.

“Let me go,” he says. He doesn’t raise his voice, he doesn’t growl, he doesn’t struggle. If Yue Qi doesn’t obey, *he’ll* make him obey.

Yue Qi releases his grip on his wrists. From the way he's been holding him, Shen Jiu can now see his face; it's a raw, open, broken expression. It splits open in segments of despair, guilt, torture. It's sordid, vile, something that crawls like a poisonous worm, leaving only pain in its wake. Watching it feels wrong, but it's almost addictive: Yue Qi is suffering, and the darkest part of Shen Jiu's chest rejoices in it.

“I wanted to tell you,” Yue Qi says. The words burst against his chest, dull and bitter. Hearing him speak is almost a mockery, and Shen Jiu is ready to shove him out of the room, trembling with anger, just to force him to sleep on the sofa, far away, *abandoned.* “Xiao Jiu, *I wanted to* tell you. From the first time I saw you and recognized you, *I wanted* to tell you.”

“And why didn’t you? If you wanted it so badly, why *not*?” Even though he’d never dare to beg, he knew his broken voice sounded like a plea. He was tired. He was so, so tired. After running away from that godforsaken palace, all he wanted was to go back to his normal life. Would he ever get his life back, the life he’d worked so hard for and built, after this? “Don’t you *dare* apologize. If you do, I’ll throw you out *the balcony.”*

It's not a lie or an exaggeration. What does it matter to him that they're on the tenth floor? Anyone who knew his reasons for doing it *would understand.*

Yue Qi takes a tense breath. His body moves, trembles. He is so big, and yet he looks so tiny, even more so when he says, “…I didn’t mean to make you suffer like this.”

It's ridiculous. Absurd, ridiculous, and it burns like red-hot steel. Shen Jiu stifles a laugh that burns against his throat, devoid of humor, only morbid and disgusted fascination.

“Oh, how lucky of me!” he hisses. Yue Qi’s eyes are delirious, pure pain, and at this point, he doesn’t care. He doesn’t even enjoy it. It’s like kicking someone who’s down and can’t move

anymore. “Yue Qi didn’t make me suffer by telling me something I was *clearly* willing to know so I could understand what was wrong with me!” he throws up his hands. Yue Qi doesn’t move away, as if even being slapped is something he deserves. Not that Shen Jiu has ever done anything like that *outside* of bed, but still, it’s *ridiculous.* Vile, humiliating, pathetic. “How benevolent of you to control how much suffering I can endure!”

“You don’t understand,” and Yue Qi, pathetic and miserable great man, seemed to choke on his own words. “I don’t-…”

"Then explain it to me!"

His voice cuts through the air like a whip. The silence that follows is so brutal it feels like an implosion. Shen Jiu doesn't want to raise his voice. He can't afford to; now, it's not just Yingying who will slip away when they have an argument. Now, behind that wall, a little girl sleeps, oblivious to the catastrophe that dwells within two men, shadows of a past larger than themselves looming over them.

“I wanted to tell you,” Yue Qi says, in a voice so sorrowful it almost sounds tragic, only to mess it up with: “But then, how could you live with that?”

Shen Jiu feels a buzzing behind his temples, as if his whole body were screaming soundlessly. A static-like noise runs through his ears, burns through his tongue, and stings against his fingers.

Shen Jiu feels like *he's burning.*

“You don’t know what I-…”

“I know,” and rudely, the miserable and desolate Yue Qi interrupts him, his voice low and soft like a prayer. “I was able to grow up by your side, in two lifetimes. I was able to have the privilege of falling in love with you in two different worlds, the gift of fate bringing you back into my life. Xiao Jiu, Xiao Jiu, I never meant to hurt you. I didn’t want knowing that to tear you away from me again.”

For a second, Shen Jiu stops breathing. Memory scrapes his throat, and his eyes cloud over, not with tenderness at the foolish and false consideration, but with fury. Shen Jiu can only *burn*. Burn with fury, with anguish, with sorrow. Burn with pain, with anger, with something gnawing at his chest where his heart beats. Is his heart swallowing itself? Is his soul rejecting the idea that happiness can reside within him?

“You, you, how selfish can you be?” The words escape him with an exhalation. “Is that your horrendous explanation? Were you afraid I’d kill myself after finding out what exactly? That I was scum, a terrible example of a human being? Were you afraid I was bigger than you, that I wouldn’t be able to bear the weight?”

“You could handle it!” Yue Qi suddenly shouts. His voice bursts out, rough, involuntary, and the sound shakes them both. Even he looks surprised by his outburst, his large, frightened eyes staring at the wall that connects to the child’s room. There is no sound from there, and when Yue Qi continues, his voice is much lower as he says, “You could. Xiao Jiu, you are so

strong. You could overcome it. But, my Xiao Jiu, it would have devastated you. It would have torn you from who you were, filled you with who you used to be. Could you have been happy, knowing the truth, living with it? Wouldn't it have been better to leave it behind, as if it had never existed? Could you have been happy these years together, carrying the weight of that life within you?"

"Deciding for me, you're always deciding for me." The answer comes out in a whisper. Shen Jiu feels that, even if it's his own mouth, even if they're his own words, he can barely recognize himself. "Didn't I have the right to know? Didn't I have the right to *understand*?"

Yue Qi trembled. "You had the right to a happy life where you didn't feel responsible for-…"

"I had a right to *my* life!" and the sob breaks from his throat, almost an animal whimper filtering into a low wail through his teeth. Shen Jiu is choked, tears burning but he doesn't feel able to shed them. "It's *my* life. I had a right to know. I had a right to know I wasn't crazy, that it was real. So many doctors, so much time invested, so many sleep studies, psychiatrists, psychologists, God! They hypnotized me to see if anyone in my family had—" His voice cracks, a sob cutting off his words. The memories overlap, recede, draw near, overwhelm. Shen Jiu takes another step back as Yue Qi reaches out to him, hesitant. "Don't you think *I deserved* to understand?"

Yue Qi lowers his head, defeated. So big, yet so fragile. How could Shen Jiu ever have felt safe in the arms of a coward like this?

"… I thought that before I understood" and his voice does not waver, but neither does it sound firm, as if they were just words that feel distant even to him "you deserved to live a life that was not the one you already suffered before."

Shen Jiu stares at him, breathing deeply. Each breath hurts, his head throbs, his stomach is so upset he hasn't thrown up on the rug because he hasn't eaten dinner. A laugh cuts through him, disgusted, horrified, with no humor but despair gnawing at his bones.

"Fine," Shen Jiu said, though he wasn't sure Yue Qi liked the look on his face when he said that one word. "I've already lived a life without suffering any of that. You already gave me what you wanted."

"It's not what I-…"

"Shut up."

The tone brooks no argument. Yue Qi presses his lips together into a thin line. The expression on his face is almost childlike, pleading, his eyes on the verge of looking pathetic and miserable. Yue Qi looks like someone who has just lost the right to hope.

"Fine," Shen Jiu said, forcing a smile. He took another step back, sitting on the bed. He crossed his legs, peering at him through his eyelashes. Contrary to what Yue Qi surely thought, he hadn't gone crazy. In fact, he was going to have to stay seated if he wanted to keep his sanity or his criminal record clean. "If you want me to *consider* forgiving you, you have to tell me the truth."

Yue Qi's brow furrowed slightly. For a moment, he wasn't far removed from the mildly confused teenager he once was. Age had only filled his face in the right places, hardening his expression; age had never taken away the kindness from his eyes or the forced smile from his mouth. Throughout his life, no one had ever noticed how fake Yue Qi's smile was, and Shen Jiu was proud to be the only one who could effortlessly detect when his smile was a farce.

Now, that also feels like a lie.

“But you know the-…”

“Yue Qi,” and just saying his name makes the pathetic man shudder, his eyes narrowed in anguish. “Tell me the truth. Don’t you dare apologize, or I’ll rip out your tongue and give it to A-Ying as a treat.” Even though it’s an empty threat, Yue Qi looks *pale.* Shen Jiu supposes that, after all, some things are never meant to change—after all, Yue Qi would definitely believe him capable of doing something as horrible as that if he wanted to. Shen Jiu isn’t going to deny it, nor deny that he’s grateful the balcony window is closed so he won’t be tempted to push him against it. “If you want me to *consider* forgiving you, tell me. This time. In this lifetime.” And he can see the exact moment Yue Qi guesses his words, because his eyes take on a visceral dread. “Why didn’t you come back back then?”

For a long moment, a hesitation that burns in his bones, Shen Jiu believes Yue Qi will apologize again. That he will lower his head, avoid his gaze, and launch into a string of stupid apologies. And Shen Jiu will beat his chest, begging to stir something within him, to touch the fibers of his heart with his pleas, yearning to shake him to his core and make him understand that stupid apologies are useless when an explanation suffices.

For a long moment, with his heart in his throat, Shen Jiu waits.

And just as he is beginning to lose that vain, stupid hope, Yue Qi takes his hand as if clinging to the life that now surrounds him and begins to speak.

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

There is nothing around him; in fact, there is nothing above him, or for him to stand on. Yet the enormous void beneath his feet does not engulf him like a beast seeking to devour him alive, and Shen Jiu merely observes the vast *nothingness* with a sickening chill against the back of his neck. It is a living nothingness, like a shadow that envelops him but does not touch him, a smoke that intoxicates him but does not suffocate him.

Shen Jiu knows, from every disgusting shiver running down his spine to the cold sweat that he feels sticking to the back of his neck, the goosebumps and the nausea against his throat, that whatever is happening, *it's not good.*

There's a distant drip. Shen Jiu takes a deep breath; the smell is almost sulfuric, metallic, and the fact that there's a drip implies there's an up and a down, a ground, a reality surrounding him that can't be real. The cold seeps into his bones, the disgust makes him stagger, trembling like a weak tree branch in a fierce storm.

His head hurts as if it were about to explode.

“Oh? Of all places, is this where Jiu-ge is?” And when the voice reaches him, so does panic. It’s a visceral dread rising from his stomach to his throat; suddenly, the nothingness around him has shape, smell, color, taste. Shen Jiu brings his hands to his throat, just so he can feel the erratic pulse against his skin, feel that there’s a hand with every nerve ending intact, pressed against the flesh that’s pressed against the bone, the elbow, the shoulder. *He's whole.* He's whole. *He's whole.*

“Hiding,” and his voice comes out choked, hoarse. Shen Jiu doesn’t know if he recognizes his own voice. “What would Yuan-di think of this?”

Among the shadows, a red mark burns.

Shen Jiu wishes he had a sword, a mace, a gun. Anything to defend himself against the enormous dark mass that slithers by like a stealthy monster. His footsteps make a theatrical noise that hits him almost to the teeth, his ears ringing, his head buzzing. The red mark burns, illuminating the cold lines of a cruel, expressionless face staring at him.

Shen Jiu doesn't know when he fell to the ground, on his knees, clutching his head and chest. His heart, like a hummingbird trapped in a cage of bones, beats rapidly. He's going to die. He's dying. He's dying, he's dying, *he's dead—*

The darkness, as if swept away by a wave, fades. Shen Jiu inhales air that burns as it presses against his throat, air that smells of pine and sandalwood, wood and ginseng. With a breath that feels almost like the first inhalation after emerging from the ocean floor for a long time, Shen Jiu forces himself to fill his lungs. It burns. It scorches. He is trembling, ridiculous, in green clothes that constrict him like a straitjacket, a heavy belt that burns him, the collar too high, closed at his throat.

“Is this a more comfortable place?” And there, the beast is right on the other side. Shen Jiu is certain there was no table, no tea set, and no demon-eyed beast, yet there they are. The beast moves his hands and pours; the tea drips against the porcelain, the cup clinking as the beast offers it to him. Even if Shen Jiu looks at the liquid, expecting to find blood and perhaps his own eye floating at the bottom, he sees only an ordinary, dark mixture. It doesn't even smell bad. “An apology, Jiu-ge. This Lord fears that Jiu-ge was already trapped in a nightmare when this Emperor came to him.”

Shen Jiu doesn't believe him. However, he won't argue; when has arguing with the beast ever led to anything good?

On his head, something heavy presses against his hair. The sleeves feel heavy and uncomfortable when he moves his arms. Even so, it's an absolute relief; the weight of the multiple layers of fabric against his skin is a constant reminder that he has skin, muscles, nerves. Every nerve ending is in place, every part of his body belongs to him; he is not in agony, he is not dying, he is not dead.

Shen Jiu extends his hands. The porcelain has warmed with the tea. An overly sweet scent rises from the cup.

The beast stares at him.

“Will you throw it to me?” he asks. Cheeky, he rests an elbow on the table, his face in his hand. His languid expression could almost be mistaken for that of a lazy tiger, licking the edges of its bloodied fangs after finishing off a herd of deer.

“Why would I do that?” Shen Jiu asks, bringing the cup to his mouth. It doesn’t smell bad, and it doesn’t taste bad either. There are no floating eyes, no blood, no finger pieces. By the standards of what the beast could serve for him, it’s a good tea.

Like a rabid dog on a leash, the stupid beast probably thinks Yuan-di might discipline him severely if he were to do something so vile to his older brother. Or at least, that's what Shen Jiu hopes.

The beast's eyes are unfathomable. It stares at him as if deciphering a puzzle, as if deciding whether to leap into action or wait. Shen Jiu lowers the cup, the porcelain clattering against the small plate. His heart is still in his throat, but it's true that there's a better taste in his mouth. At least he no longer feels the toxic, noxious sensation of blood in the air, clinging to his palate and nose.

“What do you want?” he asks. The beast tilts his head a little more, his eyes not having blinked once. It’s irritatingly chilling to his own peace of mind.

“How is Baoxian?” the beast asks instead. There is no change in his expression, and yet Shen Jiu feels as if the very emptiness of his face is mocking him. It burns against his veins, in his stomach, acidically against his throat. Can it poison him in a dream? Yes, of course the beast can, but that doesn't mean *he's willing* to do so, because *if he were,* of course Shen Jiu wouldn't remain silent.

Would Yuan-di believe him, if that were the case? Would he believe that his stupid boyfriend was tormenting him in his dreams, like the disgusting nightmare creature that he is?

It's not poison, he supposes. He's still alive. He's still alive, he's still alive, and because he's still alive he must answer. Even if the beast's expression doesn't change, there's something dark in his eyes that seems to grow darker with every moment Shen Jiu passes without answering him.

“Fine,” he replies, because what else can he say? “Safe.”

“Imagine this Lord’s surprise,” Luo Binghe hums, still resting his face against his hand, his eyes narrowing slightly, “searching for his daughter to make sure she had a proper dinner, only to find she wasn’t anywhere in the palace. It wasn’t until she fell asleep that this Lord was able to find out *where* she was. And what a surprise this one got!”

Shen Jiu swallows. The beast watched him with something so ferocious in his gaze that Shen Jiu wouldn't be surprised if at any moment the entire facade of tranquility crumbled. The walls of the bamboo house around him would fall, the scent of pine would be nothing but a hallucination, and once again, forced by the weight of his own past, clinging to his nightmares, he would be suffering in the darkness, going mad as the pain consumed him.

In another life, Shen Jiu hadn't hesitated to accept so much pain. He had deserved it, after all. But now?

“Yuan-di could barely handle Chengle,” Shen Jiu says. He looks at the bottom of the cup, the herbs stuck to the surface as he stirs the liquid. If he knew anything about reading leaves, he would try; however, he doesn’t think he can trust anything the beast created. “Chengle alone is too much for him.”

“A-Yuan is a good father,” and as he utters those words, there’s something darker than a threat about the beast. He straightens up slightly, abandoning his slack posture, his eyes irritated. “Jiu-ge is inconsiderate to say—”

“I’m not saying he isn’t,” Shen Jiu quickly interjects, nipping the beast’s tantrum in the bud before it can devastate an entire village on a spiteful whim. “Of course, Yuan-di is a good father. However, it’s not like he *chose* to be one, if you know what I mean.”

Just to avoid the beast's face, Shen Jiu finishes emptying his cup and sets it down. It taps, perhaps a little louder, against the porcelain, charred leaves at the bottom. He can't guess what they're supposed to be narrating, leaves weaving together distant pasts and darkening futures. He can't even try to imagine if the beast has left some kind of hidden, resentful message against him there at the bottom.

“This Lord understands that A-Yuan’s will was not to have a family, until he obtained one,” the beast says, as if those words could have some kind of calming effect. Doesn’t he see how he only came to ruin, corrupt, and destroy? He can’t blame Chengle—even if the child is half-beast, it’s clear he’s just a child. Blaming a brat for being unstable and dependent is only blaming him for not receiving the care and education he deserves. Now, his little nephew will have it, and Shen Jiu has no doubt about it. But he also has no doubt that the beast has no right to speak about the son he left behind, or about Yuan-di. “A-Yuan’s benevolence, his enormous heart, is something this Lord can only cherish as a great treasure.”

Shen Jiu forced himself not to grimace in disgust. Weren't those flowery words just more of the same? How many times had that vile mouth lavished compliments on any of those wives, how many conquests had he made amidst territories and devastation? How many wives had he acquired, and why did he think he had the right to have Yuan-di above them all? How had he even managed to get Yuan-di to *agree* to that? With all the ranting his brother did about stupid imperial harem novels, Shen Jiu *would think* he'd have better judgment when it came to being part of one.

“Your mouth keeps talking, but your brain doesn’t seem to be involved,” Shen Jiu complains, completely losing his composure. What was the beast playing at? Dragging him along, terrorizing him, drawing him into a ridiculous game. Did Shen Jiu look like an idiot, or what? “Yuan-di had an *obligation* to take care of Chengle. Yes, yes, he had a big heart to do so,” he waved his hand casually. He supposed that in that… the beast wasn’t too far off the mark. Anything else, Shen Jiu couldn’t even imagine. After all, falling with his brother, for Chengle had been the greatest gift life could have given him. “But his good intentions don’t imply that he wanted this life for himself. *Have* you asked him, beast?”

The beast's expression twitches. It's just a small thing, a subtle spark in a perverse darkness. Shen Jiu can feel his pulse against his throat, a visceral and entirely justified fear gnawing at his insides. A beast, even with a collar, is still a beast. He will be punished for attacking, *but he will attack.*

“A-Yuan has expressed his happiness with the life he now possesses,” the beast says, stubborn as only he can be, a sneer making his mouth look more animal than human. “If A-Yuan did not feel the desire for a life with this Lord, a life raising *his* child, his wishes would be granted.”

“And you think he’ll tell you?” Shen Jiu can’t help but accuse him. He can’t help but want to stab him, shove him, shake him. Panic surges adrenaline, and adrenaline overrides reason in his brain. He fears the pain, fears *dying.* He fears being trapped in this nightmare forever, being tortured again and again as he knows the beast can do. “He’s incapable of saying out loud how ill he is. He’s incapable of *accepting* all the times he’s been on the brink of death because of his stupid neglect of himself. Every day of his life, he’s *pushing himself harder and harder.* And it’s *your* fault. Not Chengle’s, even if he’s the one who’s pulled him out of his comfort zone. Chengle has made Yuan-di happier than he’s been in the past few *years,*” and saying it hurts. It hurts against his throat, behind his teeth, in the despair that flows like a burn on his palate, “but he can’t survive just by happiness.”

The beast clenches his jaw into a tight line. For a moment, Shen Jiu thinks he sees something break in his pale face. It flashes in his eyes, in the tension of his jaw, in the slight tremor beneath one eyelid. It's as if the beast, the creature made of violence and blood, truly has emotions, writhing like a tsunami survivor flailing desperately when it has finally managed to surface.

“In this Lord’s world,” he says in a voice that sounds almost *human*, “there are countless plants, herbs, and flowers that could be *useful*.” Then, like an animal that has caught its prey, the beast curls his mouth into a cruel smile. “But Jiu-ge already knows that. Am I wrong?”

Shen Jiu longs for a fan in his hands. He doesn't have one. He's never bought a fan in his entire life. Yue Qi has given him a few, now and then; Shen Jiu has pushed them to the back of a wardrobe, hiding them in the same corner where he hid his nightmares, unwilling to look too deeply, unwilling to accept that anything in his life could bear even the slightest resemblance to the life he saw every time he closed his eyes.

“And what would you suggest, beast?” Shen Jiu said, raising an eyebrow. The beast’s grin tightened. “Soul-Healing Lily? That’s not a curse that can be broken with it. Seven-Healing Daedalus? Of course, if Yuan-di’s affliction were located in one of his organs. Healthy Rebirth Primrose? If what you want is for Yuan-di to die of agony as all his flesh regenerates, dying and being reborn, then of course. What other options have you considered?” Shen Jiu narrows his eyes. Something in the beast’s face had turns sickly pale, and seeing him so disoriented in the nightmare he had woven gave him an absurd and delicious satisfaction. “Unless there are medicinal herbs in the demon realm that I’m unaware of, I don’t think anything from your world can *truly* heal Yuan-di. What he has is something without a cure.”

It wasn't a lie. For years, Shen Jiu had been obsessed; how could Yuan-di, the curious, small, chaotic Yuan-di, be denied something as vital as health? How could he not run barefoot in the

garden, how could he not make mud pies? How could every joyful moment of falling down and being pampered by his family have to be followed by a visit to the hospital because Yuan-di's pain from that little fall wouldn't go away even a week later? How could something as unique, as vital as the ability to breathe, be denied to him in random ways when the air itself seemed to reject him as if it despised his life? How could he not spend a single day of his childhood without knowing what it felt like to exist without pain?

Autoimmune. His cells, consuming, attacking, no longer recognizing themselves as belonging to the world of the living, seeing themselves as an enemy within their own body. With his muscles and joints swollen like those of a worn-out puppet, how could Shen Jiu not feel the injustice every time Yuan-di canceled any plan at the last minute with an excuse? Family visits, dinners, birthdays, trips. How could he know when the pain would be too much for him, how could he know when not only the pain, but the loneliness of choosing to isolate himself and not accepting help when it was offered, would be too much?

In that respect, Shen Jiu must feel *only* a little gratitude toward the beast. Yuan-di, sullen to visitors, prickly as a cat disturbed without warning during a nap, seems to have no problem letting the big bad beast into his life, his apartment, his arms. It's disgusting the more Shen Jiu thinks about it, and the more disgusted he feels, the more hatred gnaws at him. He doesn't hate the beast because of that, that's a fact; he hates himself, for finding solace in Yuan-di's ability to trust someone enough to let him get so close, to let him into his closed-off life, for wanting someone near.

Even when he only pushes his family away, as if he weren't even a real human being Yuan-di feared harming, he clings *to* the meager companionship the beast provides. He believes his foolish promises, trusts in a filthy loyalty disguised as flattery, while sweeping all the other wives, mothers, and children he doesn't care enough for under the rug.

With everything on the table, Shen Jiu can only despise it.

The beast's mouth curves. The smile is almost lazy as he says, "So, *you remember*."

“No,” Shen Jiu says. The beast raises an eyebrow. “I’ve been haunted by a past that isn’t mine, choices I wouldn’t make, and enough pain to break any man.” And he’s not being dramatic about it. He didn’t grow up with memories. During his childhood, during those early years of youth, *something* felt strange, different. Then, only in an adolescence that had arrived with all the abrupt hormonal changes that *shouldn’t* include having vivid memories of a past life, had Shen Jiu been able to *fear* and lock it all away. To distance himself, to flee, but never truly escape. After all, how does one escape oneself? “If what you wanted to know was whether I remembered, you could have asked me.”

“Would you have answered me truthfully?” the beast asks. It *almost seems* amused, and Shen Jiu snorts. The utter fool in front of him just smiles.

“Why wouldn’t I have?” Shen Jiu replied. The beast’s expression seemed to freeze, as if his words and thoughts had been knocked away. Ah, what more could Shen Jiu want? “I don’t know how much time has passed for you. For me, it’s been a different life. You may think I’m the same person you once knew, but I’m afraid I’ll disappoint you. I’m just a person with agonizing memories of who I once was and who doesn’t intend to be again.”

He doesn't want to dwell on those memories. He doesn't want to see the elegant house he set ablaze, he doesn't want to see the despair reflected on his own face as he killed his only mentor up to that point in his life with his bare hands to keep Yue Qi alive – a Yue Qi who was no longer Yue Qi, who had *abandoned him,* who *hadn't come back for him,* who had chosen *to leave him*.

Shen Jiu forces himself to breathe through the wave of nausea. No. He can't go back to that. He can't return to a past that no longer belongs to him, to a life that is nothing more than a distant memory of someone who once had the misfortune to be. What else, besides misfortune? To be Shen Jiu, in that life, meant being just another number, a slave, less than human. To be Shen Jiu, in this life, meant to be long through time. Jiu, with the character of *longer*, of one who endures through time.

In both lives, the same sound. In both lives, a meaning so different it could tear away the mask of a beast embittered by suffering, misfortune, and misunderstanding, and transform him into a human being. Only in one of his lives had he had the chance to be cared for, to be loved, to be protected; only in one of his lives had he been able to love, to trust, to surrender without fear, to hold a fortunate life in his hands and not wish to ruin it for something he didn't possess, *because he possessed* a fortune greater than the money he had ever had: a love so fierce, sordid, and authentic that it would undoubtedly burn through him.

Who could say that a family is the only thing needed to give humanity to a heart that could do nothing but agonize, drowning in suffering and hatred?

“You remember me,” the beast says. It’s not a question, but Shen Jiu nods nonetheless. As if forgetting the beast were *easy.* As if the instinctive fear of his presence were unjustified. “You remember what you did to me.”

“I remember what *you* did *to me,*” he retorts. The beast doesn't look guilty, though he doesn't seem to revel in it either. There's no deep pride in him, but neither is there any remorse.

It's a middle ground that Shen Jiu can understand quite well.

“I tried to kill you,” Shen Jiu says, because after all, *that’s* what he did. That’s what he did for weeks, months, years until he thought he’d succeeded. Even so, dreams never came true for someone like him, especially not those that brought something positive to his life. “Every night, I wished you would die. And you, like a cockroach, survived.”

The beast stares at him. The teacups have vanished in an instant, along with the tea set and arrangements on the table. The walls, as if shaken by a tremor originating at the very heart of the world, shudder. The decorations arranged according to elegant feng shui principles seem on the verge of collapse.

“Why?” he asks. In his voice, it’s a hollow sound. The sound of emptiness speaking, the sound of a scream that died long ago. “What did you see in me to do that to me?”

Shen Jiu is not a hypocrite; he could have been, but he doesn't believe that lack of self-criticism has accompanied him to this life as well. Desperate for answers, how could he not

know what it means to carry for years a sorrow greater than one's body, yearning for *just* one answer?

In those moments, as distant as looking through an old, faded photograph, Shen Jiu remembers himself as stubborn, fierce. He had never received an answer, so why should he give one? If he had never had anything, why should he ever have to give? Why should everyone have, why should everyone get it, *except him?*

In this life, Shen Jiu has achieved more than one answer.

“To me” is all he can manage to reply. Luo Binghe’s mouth twists, a beast breaking into a human, incomprehension that seeps into his very bones. And, *oh,* even now Shen Jiu can’t help but see him, like a distorted mirror, a heap of consequences and tragedies he’d thrust upon him. “Wasted talent. A heart too innocent. A soul too pure. Why you? You were a poor devil, a wanderer of the streets, and you had a mother you wanted to make proud. The desire to make someone proud can stem from fear, but also from love. Someone like you didn’t fear the memory of a deceased mother, but rather *loved her*.” And Shen Jiu shakes his head.

He can, and he can't, understand. He can hear his thoughts, remember the scene before him, see the movement of his hands, the expression in the brat's eyes. It's not so different from now. It could, and it isn't.

“There was determination in your hands, strength in your gaze, but weakness in your heart and will. How could someone with the potential for greatness be so weak, and yet have more opportunities than I ever had?” And he doesn’t hesitate to speak, doesn’t hesitate to utter each word Shen Qingqiu had kept locked away. He's no longer him, those words no longer belong to him, and he believes it is time to let them go. “At that moment, I saw myself in you, and I saw everything I had never had. I hated you. I desired your suffering. I wished you would break, shatter, be humiliated. I wanted to see you *suffer.*” And, for the first time, his mouth curves into a smile. Don’t these sound like the capricious, adolescent wishes of a young man who has never developed emotionally or mentally? From one who had no chance at more than survival, Shen Jiu can expect it. “I wanted to see you lose hope because I couldn’t stand that you had it. Then, when you came back, I didn’t even regret it. I sowed my harvest.”

The beast's face is so pale it looks like wax. He clenches his jaw, and the walls haven't stopped shaking; in fact, they've shaken even more fiercely. Shen Jiu's hands are clasped in his lap, watching him collapse like a crumbling mountain. First pebbles, then catastrophe.

“Do you regret it now?” the beast asks, when he seems to control himself enough to speak. His nostrils are still flared, his mouth in a sneer of contemptible disdain.

“I wouldn’t repeat my actions if I went back to those days,” Shen Jiu says, because he is no longer Shen Qingqiu, no longer a slave, no longer someone who was abandoned. He was, once. Now, that doesn’t belong to him, and it never has. He willingly gave something up, he died, and remembering who he once was, all that he suffered and all that he lost, does him no good. Perhaps, just as Yue Qi said, wanting to leave it all behind as if it never existed was the right thing to do after all. “Saying I regret it, that’s pointless. I’m not the same person, I haven’t had the same experiences, of course I wouldn’t make the same decisions. Would you judge the rose petal because the thorn pricked you, Luo Binghe?”

At the mention of his name, the beast stirs as if struck. He sits upright, his back tense, his eyes wide in shock. Shen Jiu supposes, after all, that this is how anyone would react if, after two lifetimes of being denied existence as a human being, were granted the mercy of a name for the first time.

Luo Binghe remains as still as a statue of salt. He doesn't even seem to breathe, every muscle tense; his jaw clenches so tightly that Shen Jiu wouldn't be surprised if one or two teeth were knocked out. His hands are tight fists, robes gripping the arid tension of his flesh like hands holding onto him, keeping him seated, neither attacking nor leaping.

Shen Jiu isn't afraid. It's not a feeling he's familiar with when near the man before him, but it's a familiar feeling now. He's not comfortable, but neither is he on the verge of terror. The beast before him, deranged and repulsive as he is, is nothing more than a broken human. A human he once shattered beyond repair. To fear the beast's bite is like fearing the bite of a dog that was only taught to do.

“I understand,” the beast says—Luo Binghe says—the man, ruined in layers of desolation, says. Shen Jiu can’t tell one from the other, but he’s not sure he’s ready for that, either. The trembling of the walls subsides, as if the earthquake has ended. The tension in the man before him loosens. “After all, blaming Jiu-ge for Shen Qingqiu’s actions would be nothing but a waste of time. Jiu-ge isn’t him. Even if he speaks like him, if he doesn’t behave like him, doesn’t hate like him, and doesn’t decide like him, is he really *him*?”

“Who says I don’t hate you, beast?” Shen Jiu can’t help but grimace in disgust. Suddenly, as if something inside his head has finally snapped, the beast lets out a laugh that shakes him to his core. The earthquake is within him now, as he clutches the table, covering half his face with one hand, the beast’s laughter widening his mouth in the most repulsive way.

“Some things never change, this Lord sees,” the beast says, and Shen Jiu twists his mouth, rolling his eyes. He doesn’t know when the arrangements and tea returned to the table, but he pushes his cup forward. Even if this is a dream, he isn’t sure when he’ll ever taste a blend with such a distinctive flavor again. Modern flavors, full of toxins and chemicals, simply couldn’t compare. “Jiu-ge, this Lord understands your concern for your younger brother. However, this one assures you that, with this Emperor, A-Yuan will be safe and well cared for.”

And getting back to the point. Shen Jiu rolls his eyes again, savoring the drink. Yes, that's good. He wouldn't mind putting up with the beast for some good tea now and then, even if it was in a damn nightmare.

“He won’t be safe and cared for if you keep leaving children in his charge,” he warns. The beast’s expression twists, but Shen Jiu continues, “Yuan-di won’t say so, because he’s too weak for those brats. But they’ll overwhelm him. He’ll go insane, he’ll lose himself trying to be everything they need, and you’ll lose *him*.”

“*A-Yuan never…”* and the beast seems to rage like a candle that, without waiting to go out, reignites. Shen Jiu clicks his tongue.

“He’s not going anywhere,” Shen Jiu says, because it’s foolish to even think that his ridiculous brother would abandon his beloved son and the stupid boyfriend he’s acquired with him, like a dog that came with fleas and, instead of getting rid of them, he trained them for a circus. “But there are other ways to lose someone without them leaving your side. Luo Binghe, when was the last time you saw him *read*? Play videogames? Complain about some ridiculous, trivial thing other than the fact that it exists in a way that’s wrong for him to be bothered? When have you ever seen him do anything other than be devoted to that son of yours?” And faced with the beast’s tense silence, the expression that crosses his face as if Shen Jiu had slapped him, Shen Jiu continues. “He’s happier now, that’s true. But how much of himself is he stealing from that false happiness? He’s *happy*, yes. But he’s so distracted from his own depression that it’s eating him alive.”

The beast does not respond. His expression is worn, ruined, his eyes disoriented, seemingly looking without seeing anything around it, as if it were lost among his memories, trying to find anything that might contradict Shen Jiu's words and failing in the attempt.

Shen Jiu knows his brother. He knows how he always denied and evaded his problems; how could he not? When depression descended upon him like a vulture circling a dying man, it wasn't an easy time to talk about it. Who talked about depression, about mental health issues? Even today, mentioning them can cost someone their career almost as much as admitting they're not heterosexual. Why would someone like Yuan-di, so desperate to conform to the normalcy the world wanted to impose on him, accept something that clearly distances him further from that semblance of normalcy? It's a miracle, as far as Shen Jiu knows, that he accepted a relationship with a man, even if he doesn't know what absurd garbage the beast used to buy his acceptance.

“A-Yuan is going to that doctor,” and the beast twists his mouth, “therapist. That should help him.”

“Not being the sole responsible and present guardian for a child should help him,” and it’s not that Shen Jiu *agrees* the beast should be more present. However, erasing the beast is erasing Yuan-di’s meager joy. When it comes to sacrificing comforts, Shen Jiu can negotiate his priorities. “If you truly love him, *don’t condition* him to become what he thinks others need. If you let that happen, there will come a point where he believes something so firmly about you or what you need from him that there’s no way to change his mind.”

And Shen Jiu has experienced that firsthand.

“When that happens, you’ll lose who he truly are,” and the beast’s expression is *almost* human. As if he couldn’t have grasped how devastating the miserable reality before his eyes truly is until now. “He’ll bury himself so deep he won’t recognize who he’s become. If he does that for you and the family you’re forcing around him, I *won’t* forgive you, and you *won’t* forgive yourself.”

The beast doesn't respond. There are no complaints, insults, veiled threats. No questions. It seems lost in deep, devastating thoughts, and Shen Jiu lets it be. The tea has grown cold in the cup.

“This Lord is working on something that will improve the situation,” the beast says, as if anything short of a miracle or ten years of therapy weren't utterly impossible for him. “Soon, Jiu-ge won't have to worry about his brother anymore. A-Yuan will be well cared for. He'll have everything the books say he needs: a strong support network and containment.”

“Have you read any books about depression?” is all Shen Jiu can ask. The beast nods firmly.

“Doctor Mu recommended reading them,” the beast says, and Shen Jiu can barely cope with the fact that Mu Qingfang apparently has access to books about modern depression. In another situation, another time, *another life,* the man might actually enjoy them. “Helping A-Yuan is the only thing this Lord is looking to do.”

“And what about that harem of yours?” he finally asks. He can’t get it out of his head, like a thorn in his side. “So much talk about ‘A-Yuan, A-Yuan,’ but you can’t seem to give him his own special place. Could you get rid of all those other women so you can give him the place he deserves? How can you be sure you won’t find someone else who obsesses you like a new toy in the future?”

The expression that dominates the beast's face is a sordid mockery.

“This Lord possessed a vast harem, that is true,” the beast says. He doesn’t appear humiliated as Shen Jiu would have liked. “Now, however, their numbers are less than half. This Lord’s harem has been dwindling. Only the mothers of this Emperor’s children will have a place in the inner court, and not as wives, but as mothers to the royal princes. A-Yuan comes from a world where marriages are between people loyal and devoted to one another. This Emperor could not dishonor such a profound belief by demanding that A-Yuan belong to a whole, when he is *unique*.”

Shen Jiu is used to surprises, especially with the number of abrupt revelations he's had lately. Even so, it hits him like a punch. He hates the thought of Yuan-di in a harem, but he hates even more the thought of Yuan-di completely surrendering his life to that beast.

He knows he will hate even more if Shen Yuan is unhappy, so he digests his hatred with a deep breath.

“Yuan-di knows nothing about this,” he accuses. He is certain that if Shen Yuan had the slightest knowledge of the entire stupid series of sacrifices the beast is making for him, he would flaunt it to the point of triumph, so that Shen Jiu would feel humiliated for not trusting the beast as he does.

“A-Yuan doesn’t know,” the beast replies with disgusting nonchalance. “If he did know, he would feel pressure, responsibility. Whatever A-Yuan decides regarding this Lord’s proposal will not be because he feels responsible or guilty, but because he wants it of his own free will.”

If he weren't the beast, if he weren't Luo Binghe, it would almost be considerate. It would be natural for his imbecile brother to consider something like this a burden, to want to assume responsibility without being sure if it's a genuine desire. Shen Jiu, despite how much he loathes the man before him, has to give him *one* point in his favor. The smallest, most

minuscule, single good point among so many that make him who he is, and yet it seems good enough to *almost make him* smile: after all, the beast *really* does seem to care for his brother.

He still disagrees, and doesn't think he ever will. But as long as the beast is looking after Yuan-di, Shen Jiu can... *tolerate him*.

“Fine” is all he can manage to say without sounding like he’s grinding his teeth. “You had to do *one thing right, at least.”*

Luo Binghe, the beast, laughs.

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After two pots of tea and more awkward conversations that resembled unsettling nightmares, Shen Jiu wakes up. The room is dark, empty; the bed is cold on the other side. Only a sliver of bluish light filters through the curtains, enough to outline the shadow of the furniture stretching out, the edge of the bed, the empty outline beside it. On Yue Qi's side, the bed remains perfectly made.

Shen Jiu stands up. He walks silently to the living room, where Yue Qi is huddled uncomfortably against the sofa. It's so wide that one of his legs dangles awkwardly to one side, barely covered by a blanket. Shen Jiu doesn't even feel the slightest bit embarrassed to shake him awake.

“Xiao Jiu?” Yue Qi opens his eyes, blinking several times, until he gets his bearings in time and space. Then, in a whisper: “Nightmare?”

“Come to bed,” he orders. He turns away without looking back; he doesn’t need to, because he can hear Yue Qi following him. He doesn’t look back when he settles into bed, nor does he look when Yue Qi settles on his cool side, the warmth of his body reaching him despite the distance between them.

Only when Yue Qi has remained tensely silent, motionless for a long time, does Shen Jiu close the distance. Like an insect drawn to the glowing heat of embers, he slips into the gap between them, pressing himself against him until Yue Qi gets the *message* and wraps his arms around him. The heat of his body is overwhelming in summer, but in winter, it's a paradise that envelops and warms him, like his own sun.

“I’m still angry with you,” he warns in a low voice, “but I need you with me now.”

“I know,” Yue Qi says, low and soft. “I know.”

Carefully, as if afraid he wouldn't be allowed, Yue Qi runs his hands through Shen Jiu's hair. Shen Jiu lets him, again and again, as if with each caress he wants to erase every one of his vain attempts to protect him from himself. Shen Jiu cannot run without Shen Qingqiu catching him; to escape who he once was is to deny who he has not become, to deny himself the understanding of his own pain, to cowardly slink away from a truth he had been so furious about not obtaining and so reluctant to accept as part of himself.

He is not Shen Qingqiu. But once, he was. He was because he had nothing this life could offer; he was because he had lost every important person in his life; he was because he was fed up, weary, filled with a hatred so profound it defied reason; he was because he hated himself enough to seek the fate that ultimately befell him. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, like the fox that finds the hare only by following the false trail it left to escape, he ended up leading it straight into his jaws.

“Xiao Jiu?”

The voice jolts him awake. He wasn't even close to falling asleep, but perhaps too relaxed. Yue Qi's steady, warm heartbeat envelops him, and as long as he doesn't speak, it's easy for him to forget how annoyed he is with him.

“What?” he snaps.

Perhaps because of his abruptness, Yue Qi takes a long time to speak. When he does, he says almost in a whisper, “…I’m worried they’ll try to take her from us.”

“Who?” Shen Jiu complains. What on earth is he talking about?

“Baoxian?” Yue Qi opens the door to a fear Shen Jiu is fully prepared to ignore. “You… we’ve been trying to adopt. How do you think social services will react when two men like *us* suddenly show up with a girl registered in your name? They… they’ll have questions, and too many suspicions.”

The truth is overwhelming. It's not as if Shen Jiu could have overthought his actions or decisions; having a baby or a child isn't difficult, after all. What's difficult is having the child accepted as his own without being married, being a man with legal suspicions of being homosexual and living with a male partner.

Social services would relish trying to make a meal of it. And, legally, they'd probably win.

“I’ll think of something” is all Shen Jiu can say.

I'll think of something when it's more urgent, that's what he could say too, but isn't it extremely urgent now? Now that social services aren't banging on their door, now that they're not running around hiding the girl. If Baoxian doesn't want to come back to the palace, *she won't.* Shen Jiu will make sure of that.

But it's true that social services *would benefit.* His three previous applications had been rejected, so how would they react when he unexpectedly registered a girl as his daughter? A girl who seemed not to exist moments before. Even with a good lawyer on his side, *hell,* even with his contacts abroad and within the country capable of helping with the creation of documents like Chengle's for refugees or undocumented immigrants, the mere fact of having a girl registered in his name when he had previously specified that he had no biological children and was so eager to adopt *would be* a huge red flag.

So what to do? How…?

The idea hits him hard. Before he's even finished thinking it, he can feel his own face twisting into a smile. It's a kind of poisonous delight, something dry that burns against his mouth and in his chest, the satisfaction of a good revenge and getting away with it in the same desperate idea. And, like any good desperate idea, the best thing about it is that *it might work.*

“Xiao Jiu?” And when Yue Qi speaks, he does so *with concern.* Shen Jiu can’t tell if he can see the smile on his face or if he’s simply felt a sudden, inexplicable panic, but still, he savors every second when he says:

“You cheated on me.”

Yue Qi chokes on his own breathing.

"*What*?"

“You cheated on me,” Shen Jiu repeats, his voice no louder than a venomous whisper. “About ten years ago. You were in your early twenties, I was in my first years of university, and I wasn’t paying attention to you like I used to. You weren’t my whole world anymore. We fought over some stupid thing, and you, you big scoundrel, cheated on me out of spite. You never said a word, *of course*, and as far as you were concerned, that was that. Then, now, nine years and nine months later, a stranger contacts you. Oh, look, her mother passed away, but she listed you as her biological father on the birth certificate. How sad.” And Shen Jiu, finally enjoying some good, devastating drama, lets the sarcasm get tangled up in his tongue. “Now you have a daughter. Congratulations.”

Yue Qi steps back to look at him. The expression on his face is absurdly funny: wide eyes in disbelief, brows raised, pale and flushed at the same time. Shen Jiu considers it a curse from Heaven that he could still find him attractive.

“I would never… I *wouldn’t*…”

“But *you did it*,” Shen Jiu says, placing a hand on his chest, pushing him down onto the bed until he's sinking in, then climbing astride him. He's malleable as butter beneath his hands, his firm body yielding as if it were fragile. Under his palm, his heart beats heavy and strong. “Where else did the child come from, Yue Qi? Babies don't grow on trees. Your mistakes have caught up with you, and now you must deal with them.” Leaning over him, Shen Jiu's words hiss against his ear. He can almost feel the hair on the back of his neck prickling. “Oh, you must be the luckiest man in the world to have a husband who can forgive you for something like that…”

Yue Qi's breathing becomes ragged. His heart, like a drumroll, races even faster. Shen Jiu can almost imagine his ears ringing with the force of his heartbeat.

With a choked voice, Yue Qi pleads, "Say it again."

“What, am I merciful and capable of forgiving?” Shen Jiu snorts a laugh. “Isn’t it absolutely obvious that I—?”

“Say you are my husband.”

Yue Qi begs for it like a starving man begs for a loaf of bread, a man lost in the desert for a drop of water. Shen Jiu rolls his eyes, snorting another laugh.

“I’m your husband, you ridiculous-…”

He doesn't even finish a word or a sentence: Yue Qi turns him around with such ferocious force that it tears the air from his lungs, and without a moment's pause, Yue Qi kisses him. It's a clumsy, desperate kiss, full of unspoken words, a hungry mouth feeding ferociously on his own, a heat engulfing his entire body. He burns where Yue Qi touches him, he burns where he doesn't. Yue Qi devours his mouth with the hunger of a lover and the knowledge of a man in love, the love of a devotee and the passion of a beloved. Shen Jiu lets himself be swept away by the heat of the kiss and the fire of his mouth; desperation is always welcome, and he only pulls away when his head feels too weak to demand more.

Shen Jiu doesn't push him too far away, despite everything. They're still tangled in the bed, breathing heavily, letting the fire transform into fury with himself and with him.

Only when his breathing calms down a little, and with an exquisitely husky voice, does Yue Qi ask, "What shall we tell your family?"

Shen Jiu rolls his eyes. Hasn't he been clear enough already?

"That you cheated on me."

Slightly trembling, Yue Qi lets out a breath that *could have* been a laugh. That idiot had better hope it *wasn't* a laugh, because Shen Jiu could easily shove him back onto the sofa.

“Your mother will never believe that,” Yue Qi murmurs.

Shen Jiu, despite everything, has to agree with him.

“Oh, of course not,” he complains. His mother *adored* Yue Qi, defending him in countless foolish arguments where Shen Jiu simply had no intention of yielding, even if he knew Yue Qi was right. “But she’ll know you’ve done something abhorrent enough that I’m dragging you through humiliation and social condemnation to grant you forgiveness.”

Yue Qi lets out a slightly more exasperated sigh this time.

“Your brother will want to smash my head in,” he warns, as if Shen Jiu hadn’t already considered that possibility.

“Ming-ge will probably just break your nose,” he hums, in his best tone of false comfort. “He respects you enough not to try to kill you.” Then he settles deeper on the pillow with a sigh. Ming-ge… he’s *not* going to think about him or all that right now. It’s already *too much.* “Besides, you know. He always thought I was cheating on you.”

“I know you never did,” Yue Qi says quickly, as if Shen Jiu had something to prove, as if he were prepared to defend him without hesitation. Such loyalty, such devotion; when he was

young, Shen Jiu had no idea what to do with it. Now, it doesn't feel enough. "I know you were only looking for… another kind of relief. If *that's* how you found comfort, and even if you did, I didn't…"

Shen Jiu, exhausted, rolls his eyes.

"I wish a second life could rid me of my bad taste," he complains. He wrinkles his nose, and one can almost imagine Yue Qi's expression without seeing it. "Heaven forbid I ever love men in a third life."

His voice is followed by silence. Shen Jiu leans in slightly, only to see a strange expression on Yue Qi's face just before he says, "...I don't like that."

"What?" Shen Jiu steps back, his fury returning like the aftershocks of a tsunami. "Talk about our past lives? Mention it? Do you plan to ignore it forever as if—?"

"*Love men,*" Yue Qi repeats, and after a moment, Shen Jiu realizes he's referring to what he just said. "I don't like that you love men. It's your Qi-ge you should love."

It's so ridiculous, possessive, and infuriating that Shen Jiu can only swat it away. There's no guilt in Yue Qi's expression, and something warm stirs at the base of his stomach, a nameless emotion which shouldn't be as satisfying as it is.

"You're standing on very thin ice and you could fall," he warns, turning his flushed face away in a grimace. "I haven't forgiven you."

"I know. I know," Yue Qi replies quickly. He seems to be searching for his gaze, his eyes. Shen Jiu avoids them, but doesn't stop him from embracing him, the warmth and strength of his arms grounding him. "It's okay if you don't."

The silence is almost a physical blanket, enveloping them. It feels different from the silence of argument, not as tense, just a little sharp at the edges. Shen Jiu will stay away from the edges, then.

"It isn't," he says, because it *truly isn't okay.* He shouldn't be so furious with the man he loves that he can't forgive him. They shouldn't be in a situation where Shen Jiu is yielding the space of his anger to seek comfort because his life has been turned upside down in the abrupt moment of a heartbeat, and all *he needs* is for the man he loves to comfort him, even if he has to pretend everything is alright for a moment. "But I'm not ready to forgive you," he warns. Then, with a pause that feels like fragile glass, Shen Jiu's smile curves. "Even less so after you got a woman pregnant and abandoned her without even—"

"*Xiao Jiu*" Yue Qi protests, with a soft groan that is half laugh, half plea.

Dawn peeks through the curtains in a trembling halo. It's barely a glimmer, no more than a mist, but when he sees Yue Qi's smile, Shen Jiu thinks that although he's far from forgiving him, he's not far from falling in love again with the man who once sacrificed his own soul to a sword more powerful than he could bear *just* to save him from that house of horrors, the

one who advanced ten years' worth of cultivation in one in the midst of isolation just to run after him, even though his own stupid shame had forced him to remain silent for so long.

How can he love someone so much that he hasn’t forgiven yet? Shen Jiu isn't sure he can understand it, but this time, he doesn't intend to let his Qi-ge go.

Chapter End Notes

SJ: Speak, you coward
YQ: *speaks*
SJ: Okay I really didn't expect this to happen

LBH: *enters SJ's dreams to seek explanations about Baoxian*
SJ: *nightmare about the dungeons and a nervous breakdown*
LBH: ... Okay, I'm doing this

SJ: How could you cheat on me and have the daughter that I brought you?!
YQ: ... Xiao Jiu /please/

久 - jiǔ - 'long' from "It's been a long time", from "Separated for long years". Long, for time and perpetuity
↑ THEY SOUND THE SAME BUT THEY'RE SO DIFFERENT *INTERNAL SCREAMS*

AND WITH THIS WE OFFICIALLY END THE SHEN JIU INTERLUDES. I definitely couldn't leave out Bingge trying to put the puzzle together..... The important thing is that he got answers!!! In fact, EVERYONE has gotten so many answers here today!!!! Communication!!!! Yayyyy

I love putting funny little touches in the narrative hahaha like little details there that are fun little nods if you know how to spot them!! ;P

Also, BINGHE DOING BACKGROUND STUFF! He's definitely doing things outside of what Shen Yuan knows, so..... What plans does the great and powerful Demon Emperor have?? ;3

I'm not sure when we'll see each other again (I'd say next week if I'm lucky? I can type by muscle memory but unfortunately editing involves my eyes TT) but!!! we'll continue with the usual SY pov :3
SO!! I hope you really enjoyed the chapter!! It was an emotional rollercoaster ;3 Writing it was as fun as it was frustrating, and it was totally worth the all-nighter I had. So you know!!!! Kudo-comentario-interaccion, let's have fun together in the comments!!!
See you soon!! ;3

Chapter 38: Third therapy session

Chapter Notes

On a scale of 1 to 10, writing this chapter hurt me emotionally a 15 :P
MY EYES ARE SO MUCH BETTER!!! The first thing I did with my eyes functioning at 95% capacity was watch TGCF donghua without glasses on the smartTV on my living. Did you know my eyes were SO BAD that even with glasses I was seeing blurry on TV just because it wasn't directly in front of me? Yes, the surgery was definitely my best option :'D OHHH, I CAN GO TO THE CINEMA AGAIN, I HAVEN'T BEEN FOR ABOUT EIGHT YEARS..... CRYING

Anyway!! :P
Chapter warnings: Shen Yuan™, mentions of ableism and homophobia in society, feelings (am I seriously giving a warning for feelings? yes. next question)

ENJOY THE CHAPTER! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan arrives early for his twenty-minute therapy session to watch A-Lang feed Snow and White frozen, dead mice, purchased from a veterinary clinic specializing in snakes and other exotic animals. The more A-Lang explains, the more curious he becomes! And, in his small comfort zone where he clearly feels more at ease than conversing with human beings, A-Lang explains that it's rarely recommended for captive snakes to have live prey: if they've grown up in captivity, they're unlikely to hunt effectively on their own, and will end up being injured or preyed upon sooner or later by what should be their food.

Shen Yuan listens as attentively as he can, even gently touching the scaly skin of one of the white snakes as A-Lang explains that the mouse she's about to eat will sustain her for two to three weeks, but that they've been adjusting the size so it doesn't upset her stomach or cause colic. It's not as if Shen Yuan finds snakes adorable, but the thought of a snake with colic from overeating is… rather more endearing than he'd imagined. Especially considering how A-Lang treats them! He cares for them as if they were two pet kittens he's raised from little ones. And Snow and White are probably, what, five or six years old? So it wouldn't be so crazy.

The image of A-Lang raising the eggs in his terrariums under heat lamps until they hatched is strangely endearing to him.

In fact, he arrives so early that he sees another of Doctor Jun's patients for the first time. She's a very tall woman, almost as tall as Yue Qi, with a firm face, harsh features, and heavy makeup as if she had an event coming up. In contrast to her makeup, her outfit is understated: a long skirt and old-fashioned heels that her mother might wear, but otherwise, her clothes

are clearly secondhand. She seems a little surprised to see Shen Yuan talking to the receptionist, and then approaches A-Lang with a warm smile.

“Ah, the Doctor’s dear nephew has made a human friend!” the woman hums, her voice surprisingly deep. A-Lang looks a little nervous, but the kind of nervousness of someone who doesn’t enjoy conversing with others unless it’s about his favorite topic. Having known Ming-ge all his life, Shen Yuan is used to it by now. “And you, little one? Are you visiting or are you a patient?”

“Patient,” Shen Yuan explains, trying not to get too involved. Is it normal to talk to someone he shares a therapist with? Isn’t it crossing a strange line—*'I know you go to therapy and you know I go to therapy'*—that shouldn’t be crossed? “I arrived early because I wanted to see Snow and White eat.”

The woman whistles. It’s a kind of obscene sound.

“Watching them eat, or eating yourself, darling?” The way she teased him made Shen Yuan feel just a little uncomfortable, and he looked away. It really wasn't the kind of comment he expected to hear from any woman! Let alone a woman who had just finished therapy! “Aiya, that embarrassed face, darling. Fine, I'll leave you alone. Anyway, I have a date, and I hope this is the one. Do I look pretty?”

The woman steps aside and turns around, her skirt twirling almost tenderly. Even if she's older (is she in her mid-to-late thirties?), she seems a little insecure behind the playful facade, waiting expectantly for a response.

A-Lang makes a sound of agreement. Shen Yuan nods, and then, only because he doesn't think it looks particularly aesthetically pleasing, he murmurs, "Perhaps change your lipstick? Your clothes are very… dark, warm, brownish tones. Isn't that a pink with a cold undertone? It clashes a bit with your clothes."

She makes a questioning noise. She moves quickly to a mirror in the corner, checks herself, and lets out a shocking gasp. “Oh, sweet darling, you’re right!” Her deep voice softens slightly. “Seriously, it doesn’t suit *anything*. What was I thinking? Ah, the pretty twinks like you always know about that.” She quickly rummages in her bag. She wipes the pink lipstick from her thin mouth and quickly rummages through the pile of accessories until she finds a brown lipstick. Shen Yuan doesn’t pay much attention, concentrating on the strangely smooth texture of Snow’s scales under his fingers, until the woman hums, “Hey, hey! How about now?”

She's lined her lips with brown lipstick. Somehow, she's blended it towards the center and applied lip gloss. It's a much more understated combination and, in fact, it matches her outfit quite well.

“Better,” Shen Yuan hums contentedly. She lets out a joyful sound, giving a small, happy jump.

“Ah, dear! I would kiss those cheeks of yours if I weren’t afraid of ruining my lipstick. It was a pleasure meeting you! Best of luck!” And then, for some ridiculous reason, she gives A-

Lang a not-so-subtle wink. Shen Yuan assumes they must be getting to know each other and developing some sort of semi-friendly relationship, because when Shen Yuan glances in the receptionist's direction, his cheeks and ears are flushed, and he's looking away.

She leaves, and Shen Yuan relaxes watching Snow and White after they return to their terrarium for the remaining minutes until his session, when Doctor Jun comes out ready to greet him.

He's wearing an open black shirt that reveals an *incredible amount* of his sculpted chest, piled high with silver rings on his hands, and even necklaces with dangling chains around his neck, slipping into the deep, unbuttoned neckline. He's glancing between Shen Yuan and his receptionist-nephew with an almost disappointed expression, as if he'd expected to find them chatting or something. Well, another disappointment! It's not that Shen Yuan knows *much* about snakes, and while he thinks it would be great to have one at home, he's not crazy enough to actually take on the responsibility of caring for one.

"Wow," he says, pointing directly to the hand the doctor had put a splint on Shen Yuan hours earlier. "Tough week?"

Shen Yuan thinks this has been the most utterly *endless week* he's had in *years.* He forces a smile, sighs, and lets himself be led to the doctor's office. He supposes that that in itself is an answer.

As in previous sessions, Doctor Jun has left the armchair he chose closest to Shen Yuan. He slumps into it, and before Doctor Jun can sit down, Shen Yuan says: "I haven't finished my homework. I just haven't had time."

It's no surprise that Doctor Jun lets out a chuckle at this point. It's irritating, but Shen Yuan doesn't think it's the kind of thing that would make him storm off; in fact, it's almost refreshing. The doctor's appointment Jiu-ge had made for him that morning had left him emotionally drained. *He hates* doctors and all their stupid childishness, treating him like a poor little thing, as if he were more disease than person. Yes, he's sick. So what? They're healthcare workers! Treating him like a *normal person* isn't going to make his day any harder. In fact, it would make Shen Yuan's day a lot easier!

"Honesty above all else, that's great, I respect that," Doctor Jun hums. He settles back in his armchair, flipping through the pages of his notebook. The ridiculous pen with the red pom-pom is back in his hand. "So, *it was* a tough week. Would you like to talk about it?"

Doctor Jun points to his wrist. Shen Yuan lets out a deep sigh.

"It's nothing," he murmurs, waving his entire arm from side to side, unable to move his wrist to downplay it. "I had a… bad run-in with a… uh, relative of Chengle's father."

"*Wow,*" and Doctor Jun leans in slightly, his eyes eager and curious. If he weren't his therapist, Shen Yuan supposes he could almost say he looks like a gossip wanting all the juicy details. "That must have been unpleasant. How did it happen?"

How could he explain the harem, the wives, the whims, the status, Xiao Gongzhu's stupidity, and everything that had happened in the past few days without saying exactly that? Shen Yuan ran his tongue between his teeth, thinking. “Well, I went to visit Chengle's father's family home. His mother is living there with, uh, the rest of the family, and she’s suffering, and *well*, she's suffering from postpartum depression from, uh, her youngest daughter.”

“*Oh,*” and Doctor Jun *shifts* back into a different position, taking notes. There’s a spark of curiosity on his face, but in the short time he’s known Doctor Jun, Shen Yuan knows that even if he’s *dying* to ask, he’ll hold back quite well, simply leading him to explain in due course. Which is great, because he hasn’t yet figured out how he’s supposed to explain the family situation without sounding insane in the process. “And when was that? The birth, I mean.”

“About eight months ago,” he replies with a sigh, if he’s calculating it right. Hell, he thinks it would be great if Chengle started getting used to the idea of having a little sister by the baby girl’s birthday. It would be… nice to throw her a party, just to cheer up Mingyan and the other kids. “That… never mind, I mean, it does matter, but it’s a separate situation. Chengle wanted to see his mom, so we took him to see her. And everything was fine, then, uh. This… sister of his father’s” he supposes ‘*sister’* is better than ‘*harem wife who’s given him two kids, one of whom I just apparently gave to my brother like a puppy someone left in the rain, and Luo Binghe doesn’t know yet and he definitely will be furious with me when he finds out,’* and also much easier to digest outside of the harem standards and all that. “…she didn’t like me and… well, she grabbed and shook me a little. But I’m fine.” Shen Yuan shrugs. “She doesn’t have a good temper, so I’m not really interested in gaining her affection or anything like that.”

Doctor Jun doesn’t look up for a moment as he writes. He writes quickly and with a fluidity that makes it seem as if he's never lifting the pen from the page. Only when he finishes does he look up and say, "A splint seems to me a little more than *a bit* of a shake."

“That’s my fault,” Shen Yuan sighs. “I was supposed to keep my wrist still, but it’s not easy to do. Between Chengle and… other things” not that he can specify that *separating children on the verge of biting each other* is something translatable to normal standards (or is it?), let alone the long, chaotic journey back from another world “I guess I did take it too lightly. I wasn’t careful.”

“I see,” and Doctor Jun takes another note. Then, when his eyes look up, he appears no different from professional in an expression that is no longer amused or gossipy as he says, “So, can I assume it’s common for you to do things for others without noticing what that *means* for you until it’s too late?”

…and that's where the therapy session begins, Shen Yuan supposes.

“Maybe?” he murmurs, because it’s not like he notices too many things until it’s simply too late. Sometimes he’s wondered if something in his head functions a little more like Ming-ge than Jiu-ge, but it’s not like it’s *too much* or awkward for others, so it’s not a question he particularly likes to delve into. “I mean, it’s not important.”

Doctor Jun raises an eyebrow, offering a slightly mocking look. Shen Yuan doesn't understand why he's making that face until he says, "You mean, *your health* in this case, isn't important?"

“It is,” Shen Yuan says quickly, “it’s just, I mean. It’s not like I’m deliberately neglecting things or anything.” He feels like he’s rambling, and he doesn’t like the *way* Doctor Jun already has his pen resting on his notes. “It’s just that sometimes there are situations where things are *more* important than me.”

“Yes, that often happens,” murmurs Doctor Jun, who is indeed already taking notes. “There are many things that are more important than others, all the time. It’s wise to recognize that and understand when there are necessary priorities in a situation.” Then, he looks up to meet his gaze before directly confronting him with: “And what do you do when you’re the priority?”

“Huh?” Shen Yuan tilts his head, only slightly confused. “Priority in what way?”

Doctor Jun raises an eyebrow. His expression loses its amusement.

“Let’s consider this scenario hypothetical,” he says, pointing to Shen Yuan’s hand. With its splint, it feels odd and heavy, and he’s sure Chengle is going to be *terrified* when he sees it, but he supposes these things happen. Two weeks like this to prevent something worse and maybe one or two physical therapy sessions. It’s not *so* bad. “Was your wrist… bent, sprained?”

“Bent at first,” Shen Yuan replies. Doctor Jun nods, toying with the red pom-pom in his hands.

“Well, with your wrist bent, it was an immediate priority for your health,” he hums. Shen Yuan bites the inside of his cheek to keep from making a face of boredom. “Did you do anything to make sure that priority was respected—by others or *by yourself*?”

Shen Yuan opens his mouth, ready to say that everyone had been complaining about him not keeping his hand still, when he notices the point Doctor Jun is making and frowns at him. Yes, his entourage had been a little paranoid, wanting him to rest and take medicine. Jiu-ge had even taken away his annoying doctor's appointments, and Binghe had tried to send him some qi to alleviate most of the painful tension. Even Chengle had been helping him, passing him plates at lunch or helping him with his coat sleeve when he left before Shen Yuan left him in Airplane's care. The truth is, *everyone* had been genuinely worried when the slight swelling worsened, the pain almost preventing him from moving his fingers, and it got to the point where even Mu Qingfang had to change the type of ointments he used on him without even consulting or telling him, but it was something that was *visually* obvious.

He… might not have taken it *too* seriously.

“I’m used to pain,” Shen Yuan explains, shrugging. “It’s not pleasant, and sometimes it’s unbearable.” He grimaces. He’s certain he’s not handling being alone on a reduced dose and a lot of xianxia herbs very well, but at least it’s not *such* intolerable pain. “But I don’t usually pay attention to it until it’s too much. My pain threshold is kind of messed up.”

“That could be dangerous,” says Doctor Jun, as if Shen Yuan didn’t already know. “Pain, after all, is a warning.”

“Oh, *sure*,” Shen Yuan says, making a disdainful face. He really *doesn’t want* to talk about his pain, or how he’s been surviving a long and tedious life with it. “I fucking know that.”

It's not as if living without pain wasn't a dream; now, however, with the experience of having had his pain blocked for a while, he doesn't feel so reluctant to feel *what* part of his body is being a thorn in his side at that precise moment.

Doctor Jun takes a few notes. Then, with a calm expression, he simply says, “Well, I can see it’s quite literally a pain in the ass for you, still, and we’re not going to get anywhere if you’re not willing to put in the effort. And it's okay that you don't want to talk about it, I won't insist. Did anything else noteworthy happen this week? Besides visiting that family home, of course.”

Shen Yuan hates that Doctor Jun seems genuinely relieved to dodge the topic entirely. Doctor Jun is a good professional, though Shen Yuan supposes that a person only needs to know a little about body language to know that he's ready to leap out of the armchair and roll right out the door.

A little less tense and somewhat grateful, Shen Yuan relaxes: “Well, actually…” he says, and snorts. Why even begin? Even though a *horrible amount* of things had happened, it wasn’t like Shen Yuan felt he had the right to talk about it. Not that he could explain much without bringing up a harem, and not that he could mention Chengle had a bunch of siblings without making him seem overly suspicious. Talking about Jiu-ge’s panic attack and how strange it felt to be a comfort and support to him? He didn’t feel right about betraying Jiu-ge like that, Doctor Jun knew him, after all! Talking about Baoxian or Chengle wasn’t on the table, and in fact, he didn’t—…

Suddenly, he feels his whole face *burning.* He has no idea what kind of expression he's made, but he's sure it must be something interesting, because Doctor Jun raises an eyebrow, leaning forward slightly, pen in hand, ready.

To be honest with himself, Shen Yuan has had *too many things* on his mind to worry about… about that. To think about *that*.

It's not like he was consciously avoiding it! Like, *yes.* It wouldn't have been a smart situation to deal with… any kind of thought or situation or explanation with, with anything that was happening around him! First Jiu-ge, then the runaway princess who had apparently now dishonored herself and slipped away—and even though Shen Yuan wants to worry about her, he feels it's *pointless.* Chengle feels only a little guilty for having been so rude, but it's clear that he's much more comfortable and happier in the apartment, watching movies, with a comfortable routine established and his books about dinosaurs that don't exist instead of enormous beasts that can eat him if he steps into the wrong forest.

Besides, Baoxian looked… quite happy even with that chaotic tangle of hair on her head. God, poor girl—it really looked like someone had taken a bite out of her hair…

The truth is, Shen Yuan hasn't thought about *Luo Binghe kissing him*. Like the key to a safe containing something potentially dangerous, Shen Yuan has taken the experience, the sensations, and the emotional turmoil, locked it away deep inside, and thrown the key far away. He believed it was far enough away that he could deal with everything when he was in a comfortable place!

Remembering that he still has to deal with that in his therapy session isn't exactly a comfort zone!

"*Please*, let's talk about it," and Doctor Jun leans closer. He crosses his legs in his seat, his fingers drumming on the edge of his notebook. "Whatever it is, *it looks* interesting."

Interesting? Shen Yuan feels dizzy. He takes a deep breath. Well, no, *no*. It was just… a manageable situation. A bit of a mix-up. After all, they had been in the world of PIDW! It was perfectly logical that he would be struck by the Protagonist's allure, even more so in his imperial robes that fit him like a glove, with his hair loose, and…!

Shen Yuan squeezed his eyes shut, pinching the bridge of his nose. But why is Luo Binghe still so attractive even outside of PIDW?!

"It's nonsense," he finally exhales. He opens his eyes only to meet Doctor Jun's dark gaze, his expression almost uncomfortably attentive. "He… *Well*. Chengle's father, he…" he swallows, lowering his voice, "kissed me."

Saying it out loud feels almost taboo. Shen Yuan has to physically restrain himself from looking around, a dizzying sensation creeping up the back of his neck. Saying it feels uncomfortably wrong, amiss, the kind of thing that shouldn't be said out loud. It's just not the kind of thing that's… normal! Not that he has a problem—anyone can do whatever they want with their life! It's just... not him!

A smile spreads across Doctor Jun's face. "Is *that* nonsense?"

There's something about his smile that makes Shen Yuan's stomach twitch as if he's going to throw up his lunch.

"Well, *yes*!" and he feels his tone slipping into hysteria. "It's *nonsense*. It's, it doesn't make any sense!" and he grimaces again. "It's nonsense that's not going to lead anywhere, after all. I'm straight."

A muscle twitched in Doctor Jun's face. He moved as quickly as he could to readjust in his seat, *casually* obscuring his face with his notebook, but Shen Yuan didn't need to be a mind reader to almost *hear* him chuckle. How ridiculous! Why did he keep seeing this quack therapist?!

"*Of course,*" and Doctor Jun looks at him with something in his eyes that seems to be directly mocking him. Shen Yuan feels *dizzy.* "Well, I'm perfectly impartial," and Doctor Jun covers the neckline of his shirt with his notebook before saying, "Do you think you could tell me what kind of symbol is on the long necklace I'm wearing? You've been staring at my

neckline every ten seconds for the last ten minutes, so I think you could tell me what symbol it is, if you're looking at it *and not my chest*, my dear straight patient?"

Shen Yuan's jaw ached from clenching his teeth so hard. What a damn—!! Cheeky! Is he seriously implying that Shen Yuan is…? He doesn't! Of course not! How could he even think he…?! He's not staring at his chest like some damn man would stare at a woman's exposed breasts in a low-cut top! It's not even a chest big enough to attract his attention, and of course, it's nowhere *near even half* the size of Binghe's chest when he wears those ridiculously tight t-shirts, even in the largest size! So, what if he was staring at that ridiculous neckline?! It's not because it caught his eye! It's just…! It's *shameless*! Why is he wearing *that* to a therapy session?!

"Well?" Doctor Jun smiles, almost innocently, his chest still covered by his notebook. "Do you need clues, or a multiple choice? Do you want to play a guessing game, give you a letter, call a friend?"

"Fuck off," Shen Yuan blurts out, as the only useful thing his brain manages to produce, and now Doctor Jun bursts out laughing.

If Shen Yuan didn't feel his face burning so much, he really would stand up and leave. How *humiliating*. Why on earth would he…? He's not *gay*! He's a perfectly heterosexual man who is… observant! What's wrong with analytically observing the human body in general?!

"Okay, *okay*," and Doctor Jun takes a deep breath, fanning himself with his hand. His face glows with such a smug, vile satisfaction that Shen Yuan seriously considers punching him. "Well, *you're straight.* Okay. Tell me about the last woman you were attracted to."

Shen Yuan blinks. Uh. *Uh.* Shen Yuan… he's not exactly sure. Did he like… A-Shui? She was his first kiss in middle school, but she was also his best and only friend, and it was an awkward thing, simply because neither of them had ever kissed anyone before! And it was kind of *weird*! It definitely *didn't* feel like kissing Luo Binghe—but maybe that was because Luo Binghe had a lot more experience than a middle-schooler? Besides, if he had really *liked A-Shui*, wouldn't he have been jealous when he ran into her at the supermarket married with a baby? No. *No*, she was nice, yes, but…

He honestly can't remember ever liking a woman.

Doctor Jun smiles. "Well, I won't press you. One more question, then." He lowers his notebook. Shen Yuan realizes that the pendant on the longest chain, hanging against his chest, is a sword that slides just below his collarbones. It is. He… He hadn't even noticed it *was* a sword. "What is it that attracts you to women?" Doctor Jun asks, tapping the edge of his notebook with his stupid pen. "What kind of bodies do you like? Do you prefer big breasts, small breasts? Nice hips, a nice butt? Or are you into thin ones? Or curvier, chubby ones? Long hair, short hair? What physical feature in women awakens *desire* in you?"

Shen Yuan focuses on taking a deep breath. He… why did he have to think about it? Weren't all women beautiful or something? Isn't assuming one is prettier than another kind of… anti-feminist or *something*? Isn't the beauty standard a social construct? Meimei has complained about it so much that his head can replay it on a loop like an old radio!

“That they be… pretty?” he hesitates, ignoring the way Doctor Jun’s mouth curves. “I don’t know. Uh. Any? As long as she’s pretty?”

“Okay, okay,” and Doctor Jun scribbles something. “Okay, define ‘pretty.’ What exactly does that mean to you?”

Shen Yuan tries to think about it. Only one person comes to mind, but it's not a woman, so he simply pushes the thought away. No. *No.*

“That’s *objectifying*,” he mutters, trying to excuse himself, trying to control the embarrassing heat against his face. Why would he look at a woman in such a vulgar way?! That… wasn’t right! Weren’t we supposed to be respectful or something?! “You shouldn’t ask me to say that, for God’s sake. It’s *objectification*.”

“Oh, it isn’t,” and Doctor Jun blinks, looking almost confused. “Well, it would be if you only saw women in *that* way. Which doesn’t seem to be the case,” and he raises an eyebrow, jotting something else down. Shen Yuan wants to grab the damn notebook and tear it to pieces. “I mean, if you were straight, having sexual preferences about the women you’re attracted to would be the most normal thing in the world. *Everyone* has sexual preferences, if they feel sexual attraction, of course,” and he shrugs. Shen Yuan feels lost mid-conversation. “So the question remains: what is it that you find *physically attractive* about women that allows you to so vehemently consider yourself straight?”

Shen Yuan is a straight man. He's a grown man who has been straight his entire life. Yes, he may not have had a relationship with any woman, or any woman may not have seemed beautiful to him in the exact way Doctor Jun describes (why would he treat them with such disrespect?! It makes no sense!!), but he is… he… Shen Yuan is *heterosexual*. He likes *women*. He has seen, read, and consumed *far too much* straight pornography and been affected by it to not be a straight man, after all. He has seen very beautiful naked women! Regardless of their body type! He’s gotten horny many times from looking at them! That is being straight!!

Doctor Jun hums something, calmly jotting something else down in his notebook. Then his smile returns to his face, and Shen Yuan again feels the urge to whack him in the face with his cane. “Well, this is interesting indeed, you know? How can you be so sure you feel desire for something, yet be unable to describe it?”

“It’s not *normal* to talk about this,” Shen Yuan complains, his voice barely coming out as a whisper. “I’m not supposed to… it’s *wrong*.”

“It’s not wrong to feel sexual attraction,” Doctor Jun hums. “If you were sexually attracted to women, you could describe what that attraction looks like. *I like* women,” Doctor Jun says, with a crooked smile, as if Shen Yuan had once thought otherwise. “Even if it’s unprofessional to say this, it’s necessary for you to understand: I’m *fascinated* by their athleticism, their strength, their ability to, you know, bend me over or lift me. Isn’t that magnificent?” And when he laughs, Shen Yuan has to grimace, because this *isn’t* the mental image he wants of his therapist. “I can understand, comprehend, and explain my desire. Can you understand, comprehend, and explain *yours*?”

Shen Yuan swallows the lump in his throat. He's not even sure he can *understand it.*

“I’m not trying to convince you that you’re gay or anything like that,” Doctor Jun says, and Shen Yuan jumps as if he’d been electrocuted at the word. The urge to slip away hits him almost like a tremor. How can he say… how can he speak using those words *so freely?* “You could be asexual and not *feel* sexual attraction, or demisexual, and only feel sexual attraction when you become emotionally involved with someone regardless of their gender. *You could* be bisexual or pansexual with a low sexual attraction to women, or *you could* simply be gay. I’m not putting you on any sexuality list, and you shouldn’t have to if you’re not comfortable with it.” And as he speaks, it’s clear that Doctor Jun is far more knowledgeable about all of this than anything Shen Yuan has ever read. What the hell is the deal with all of this? Isn’t being gay, straight, or bi just the options for men? He’ll walk away with a headache and he’ll know *exactly* who to blame. “I’m simply paving the way for you to ask yourself this question and find a place of comfort where you don’t live in shame every time you hear the word gay, as if it were going to hit you in the face.”

Shen Yuan could be the one who hit Doctor Jun in the face.

He takes a deep breath; his head aches, a constant, uncomfortable buzzing. It's… it's all so *ridiculous.* Shen Yuan is… he isn't… he…

He doesn't like Luo Binghe. *He doesn’t attract* Luo Binghe. He's not gay. It's true that Luo Binghe is attractive, *yes.* How could he not be? It's in his very nature! He's the most attractive! Unparalleled beauty who breaks down walls and conquers every heart! How was Shen Yuan supposed to not notice his attractiveness? And it's not like he's gay or anything for noticing it. And Luo Binghe kissed him! Yes, well, he wanted to kiss him, but just because Luo Binghe has some kind of third-century bisexual discovery doesn't imply that…! It doesn't mean anything!

“I just want to say,” and Doctor Jun continues talking as if that were the only thing he’d done, besides making Shen Yuan want to punch him in the face, “that sexual repression is like forcing a door shut. Sooner or later, something will push from the other side. Whether it’s something that will break when it falls, or whether you’ll manage to open the door before someone gets hurt—and that someone is probably you—is a conscious decision you need to *meditate on*. Observe calmly what happens when you stop lying to yourself.”

And now, as if simply settling in, Doctor Jun leans back a little further on the armchair. The contrast of the white triangle of his chest, the way he seems to want to pry off the last button of his neckline, each silver accessory sliding over his collarbone, the way his shirt pulls tight around his arms—Shen Yuan can't stop *staring,* more aware than ever that he's *looking.*

“The funny thing about attraction,” Doctor Jun hums, as if it were a casual conversation tugging at one of the dangling chains, toying with it like a teenage girl twirling her hair around her finger. Shen Yuan feels a sensation similar to a punch when, suddenly, in his head it's not Doctor Jun, but Luo Binghe sitting in that exact position, looking at him with the same dark eyes, his long hair spilling like a cloak over his shoulders, his black shirt about to burst, the buttons barely clinging to his massive chest… “It doesn't disappear just because you want to deny it.”

Shen Yuan should leave.

Shen Yuan does not.

“Fine,” Shen Yuan says. He’s clinging to the last vestige of his sanity; it makes no sense, *nothing makes sense.* He’s a straight man, he’s been a straight man for the last twenty-five years of his whole life, how could he…?! And yet: “Let’s suppose. *Hypothetically*. Let’s suppose… I’m *attracted* to a man. The way I should be attracted to a woman. What would happen?”

Doctor Jun remains unfazed. In fact, the smile on his face is almost endearing as he says, “First of all, why *should you be* attracted to a woman?”

Shen Yuan opens his mouth. Then he closes it. When he opens it, the words are almost too difficult to say: “Because… I am a *man*.”

Doctor Jun raises an eyebrow. “So? Where is it written that men *have* to be attracted to women?”

“I mean, *I know* I’m not—” Shen Yuan feels suffocated, choked by things he doesn’t know how to express. “I mean. I am. I’m… normal?”

Doctor Jun raises his other eyebrow. His expression remains quite curious. “So, a man who is attracted to another man isn’t *normal* to you?”

“That’s not what I meant!!” Shen Yuan rubs his face with his hand; his throat burned from suddenly raising his voice, a lump in his throat that almost choked him. “It’s not. It’s not that. It’s okay whatever anyone… feels or wants or… it’s all fine, it’s *normal.* Just… not me. Not me.”

“Why would it be normal for others, but not for you?” Doctor Jun leans in again, holding the pen and gently twirling it between his fingers. “Why, if not being straight is normal for others, wouldn’t it be normal for you?”

Shen Yuan is speechless. He has no explanation. He closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose tightly. Fine. *Fine*. He’s thinking about it.

“There should be something *normal* about me,” he says, and saying the words feels like having his intestines ripped out through his mouth. Like a stomach infection he could purge that humiliates and hurts him at the same time. “I’m sick. Physically. Psychologically. I can’t do normal things, I never could do *shit*. I can’t go to parties, go to bars, take a walk, travel the world, meet people like *normal people do*. And I don’t even want to! Everyone else is supposed to be able to do it and *I’m not*! I can’t have a *fucking normal life*. I can't feel healthy like *a normal person.* Now I can't even love someone *in a normal way?”* The lump in his throat that chokes him breaks; has the infection in his throat returned? Have his glasses fogged up from the heat of his face? "Why is there nothing *normal* about me?"

Doctor Jun moves. The next thing Shen Yuan sees, he's moved a packet of tissues from the end of the table to right in front of him. Only when the drops start to trickle down his cheeks

does he realize he's *crying his eyes out.*

Great. Damn. Just what we needed.

“I think so,” hums Doctor Jun while Shen Yuan wipes his fogged-up glasses and the tears in his eyes; in this moment, Doctor Jun has a decidedly thoughtful expression on his face. It's not the kind of expression that would make him want to hit him, but the expression that made him decide to continue therapy with the least doctor-like doctor he's ever met. “… And this is just my opinion, and you can take it as lightly as you want. But seriously, *look at yourself.* You're crying because you *don't want* to be gay in a society like the one you live in that has made you believe you'd be abnormal for being so. You're surrounded by a structural ableism that has made you to believe you're less than others because of a disability that isn't your fault, and it doesn’t even let you try to live the life y*ou want* because you don't want to be exposed to not being able to follow the same path at the same pace as everyone else. You have some friends who look out for you, a family that loves you, a son you love, and a *strange emotional situationship* with your son's father. In my professional opinion, I think you're absolutely normal. One of the most normal patients I've ever had.”

Shen Yuan lets out a wet laugh. Right after, he starts crying again.

Chapter End Notes

SY: I'm heterosexual
DR.J: Name a woman you've ever been sexually attracted to
SY: ...Does Hatsune Miku count?

SY: I can't be gay, because being gay would imply that the only normal thing about me isn't so normal
DR.J: ...Okay, let's talk about that NOW

I'm an asexual person who was definitely going to put the spectrum of asexuality and demisexuality in the mouth of our dear Dr. Jun, because if even realizing I was asexual wasn't something I did in therapy, IT DEFINITELY WOULD HAVE BEEN NICE— anyway, does anyone else have the headcanon that SY and even SY!SQQ is demisexual? Or is it just me? As an asexual person with a PRETTY high libido, I think this guy would just have too much libido and desire, but not simple attraction, and I'd love to explore that in a fic someday, but, uh, I already have a lot (I've only published 20 fics this year, AND THAT'S NOT COUNTING THE ONES IN MY DRAFTS, someone please exorcise me or something. Or not. It depends if you want more updates)

Also lol Dr. Jun clarifying to SY that he /also/ feels attraction to women despite how ridiculously queer he seems at first glance, and SY not understanding why he's saying that because to him, this queer diva is straight. SY. Honey. Love. What kind of glasses are you wearing? He's inherently incapable of seeing anything queer around him, neither

his queer therapist nor the patient who is clearly a trans woman. I just want to squeeze him like a squeezy and see what noises he makes /affective

I want you to know that the scene of Dr. Jun crossing his legs like Sharon Stone in Basic Instinct has been in my head since BEFORE Shen Yuan started therapy, making Shen Yuan realize how sexually attracted he is to men outside of his own unreliable narrative. That single scene in my mind MAY have been the exact reason I chose Tianlang Jun as Shen Yuan's therapist... forgive me, I love my dear demon dilf so much, I couldn't pass up the opportunity

We've already entered the final arc of this fic... are you as nervous as I am???? :'D
AHH, I HOPE YOU ENJOYED THE CHAPTER. I MISSED YOU SO MUCH, MWAH!!! A HUGE THANK YOU TO ALL THE NEW READERS WHO HAVE JOINED! I LOVE YOU ALL SO MUCH!!!!! Thank you for reading and for all your support! And don't forget to kudo-comment-interact! ;3
See you soon! MWAH

Chapter 39: Third stage: negotiation

Chapter Notes

HI! :D Ah, it's been a while, hasn't it? Sorry, my depression has been a real bitch, and we're in one of the—what I consider—most... uh, cute arcs? Yeah, it has its drama, but what I'm planning for this arc of this fic is something really soft and beautiful, and honestly, it's hard to get into that mood with my depression being such a pain in the ass. BUT I got some fresh air, vented, and I think I'm stable now (my other fics wouldn't exactly say so, but I've used them as free therapy and venting, so they can't really speak for themselves either)
So, the important thing: HEY, WE SURPASSED 100,000 HITS AND 1,000 BOOKMARKS? REALLY? I'M CRYING. YOU GUYS ARE AMAZING, THANK YOU FOR READING AND ALL YOUR HUGE SUPPORT!! I don't think I'll ever be able to thank you all enough for joining me through this fic. You're been there since my manic episode and me updating daily until now, and I can't even begin to explain HOW GRATEFUL AND HAPPY I AM. This fanfic has saved my life, YOU guys have saved me :') I'm so incredibly grateful

Anyway, anyway. Let's get back to it. Sorry, I'm just emotional :P
Chapter warnings: references to the major trauma of childhood abandonment. No Shen Yuan™, surprisingly

Enjoy the chapter! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Explaining what a splint is to a child who's used to bones healing in days and sprains in hours is exactly as difficult as it sounds. Shen Yuan takes all his time, patience, and gentle words to explain to Luo Chengle, his sweet little boy with wide, worried eyes and furrowed brows, that *no*, his bone isn't broken; *yes,* he has to keep his hand still; *yes*, it hurts a little; *no,* it's not his fault.

"But I pulled Baba's hand!" Chengle is sitting on his lap, his big eyes moist and his face contorted in a pout that breaks Shen Yuan's heart. Ah, his poor child! "I could have hurt him! *More*! I always hurt Baba!"

His child looks on the verge of something *worse* than crying, if Shen Yuan can guess. Airplane seems to sense it too, because he immediately stands up and runs off like the damned coward he is. Shen Yuan takes a deep breath, shaking his head.

"That's not true," he hums, brushing his child's hair with his fingers. "This is my responsibility. I was careless, and now I must take care and make sure it heals. But it certainly won't take as long as the doctor said," and that's an obvious truth. He's certain that

as soon as Luo Binghe sees the extent of his injury, he'll bring him some xianxia that will ease his pain and, hopefully, speed up the healing process. He's been giving him quite a few strange teas that have made his pain bearable without him needing to be loaded with medicine, so *he supposes* there must be something in it. "There's nothing you can do that could hurt me."

"But I hurt you *before*," the boy protests, pouting. His small hands wrap around Shen Yuan's forearm, and Shen Yuan sighs. Despite using healing creams, he still has whitish lines on his skin; he doesn't mind seeing them, really. It's a little ridiculous, and certainly silly, but seeing the accidental wounds Chengle left him with when he first came to him makes him realize how much his son, molded only by love, has grown. His sweet, precious boy. Ah, Shen Yuan has truly given so much of his heart to this little one… "I don't want to hurt Baba. I don't like it!"

Shen Yuan places a kiss on his child's small forehead. He knows this is where his zuiyin would glow if he were more annoyed than sad.

"It's not your fault," he repeats. Then he takes *another* deep breath. "But you should still apologize to your sister. *You both* need to apologize," he clarifies, before his son can protest. "You weren't fair to her, and she was rude to you. You both said some really awful things to each other," and he tries to suppress a grimace. Honestly, *he didn't think* either Chengle or Baoxian could say such rude things to each other. He supposes that's the influence of the harem on them, despite everything. "She needed a place to stay until she got back. And spending another day or two with your sister wouldn't have been so bad."

Luo Chengle pouts. Then, with watery eyes, he looks up. Shen Yuan's heart breaks a little more, even more so when the boy says, "But Baba said the same thing about *me*. That I would just stay with Baba until Father Emperor came for me," the boy protests, and Shen Yuan grimaces. He's sure he told Airplane that at some point—when had Chengle heard it? "And then Baba stayed with me. What if Baba wanted to keep Xian-jie? No!" And the boy clings to him with both arms, hugging him and burying his face against his chest. "I don't like it," he murmurs, his voice reaching Shen Yuan softly.

Shen Yuan sighs. He pats the child gently and rocks him in his arms, comforting him. Part of him wants to laugh; seriously, he's the one with a splint on his hand! He hasn't had a splint since he was Chengle's age! He should be able to cry a little in frustration too! Though on the other hand, he supposes that's the price of fatherhood: putting his child first.

It's not a difficult job.

"That's true," Shen Yuan admits with a sigh. Luo Chengle hugs him a little tighter, and although it slightly cuts off his breath, it's not *too* painful. "When you arrived, my sweet child, it's true that I *wasn't* ready to have a son," he says. Chengle shifts slightly, his eyes still watery and curious as they gaze at him. Shen Yuan allows himself a smile, gently rocking the child in his arms. "I was hoping your father would come and take you, and *I prayed* that it would happen, because I didn't know how to care for you as you deserved. How could anyone not love you, not adore you so much? You're the sweetest, smartest child." Luo Chengle hides his head at these words, shaking his head. Shen Yuan brushes his hair with his fingers, sighing. "Then, when your father arrived, I realized that *I couldn't* let you go. That I

couldn’t let you return to a place where you were so unhappy. That your happiness was the only thing that mattered, and I suppose that’s when I became your Baba.”

Shen Yuan isn’t sure exactly when he truly began thinking of Luo Chengle as *his.* As his son, his sweet child. It was impossible not to be captivated by his child's sweetness behind the claws and hisses, his bright eyes, his innocence and curiosity, just as it was impossible not to feel his heart ache for the pain in his little boy, his abandonment, his fear. Shen Yuan had just… wanted too much to make him happy. *And he knew* that he alone couldn't replace his biological parents—hell, he alone, without the support of his family and Airplane, he surely would have *gone mad* by the second week! It really does take a village to raise a child.

So, even if he doesn't remember exactly how, feeling like Luo Chengle's father was almost second nature. It felt *natural.* Like the missing piece in his life. Like what he needed to make everything truly bright.

“What if it happened again?” Chengle complains. He has a big pout and his face is redder than ever, more inclined to burst into tears than a moment ago. “What if Baba really, really loved Xian-jie and she became his daughter too? I don’t *like it*,” his little boy continues to complain. Shen Yuan is starting to think about exactly how to tell him that wouldn’t happen even if she stayed (and honestly a little scared that he won’t be able to come up with a reason —his heart is too soft to *turn down* any of Luo Binghe’s children, he supposes, or any child in need) when Luo Chengle says, in a much quieter voice, “I don’t want Baba to replace me like Mom did.”

Shen Yuan feels a lump rise in his throat at the sight of his child’s utter despair. He hugged him as tightly as he could with his one free arm, rubbing gentle, soothing circles on his back.

“Chengle, baby…” he begins. Chengle shakes his head, the pout trembling on his lips.

“I know!” he complains. “Baba Yuan always says Mom didn’t replace me. Father Emperor says so, and Lingling says so. But it *hurt*!” And the boy hiccups, and now, yes, tears pour from his eyes like waterfalls. His mouth trembles, and his erratic breathing only makes him look so neglected that it *pains Shen Yuan*. “Even if Mom didn’t replace me, *it* hurt!” his boy repeats. “It hurt like she did. And that wasn’t nice.”

“Oh, darling,” Shen Yuan sighed, hugging him tightly. He supposed this was the kind of wound that would take a long time to heal, because what was logic when children had emotional wounds like this? Even if he had tried his best to make Chengle understand that he hadn't been abandoned and replaced, the truth was that Shen Yuan hadn't given much thought to the fact that, even if that wasn't the reality, *it was* what the child had experienced, perceived, and felt. A change of perspective wouldn't make his wound disappear. “I'm so sorry.”

Luo Chengle clutches his sweater, sobbing. Shen Yuan gently rocks him, and only then does Airplane return. Shen Yuan glares at him with venom until the damned author unfurls a blanket—the soft, fuzzy throw Chengle has claimed as his own since the first night he arrived —and Shen Yuan sighs. He can't really be furious with him, either. It's not like Airplane knows what else to do; with his own emotional baggage, what more can he expect?

He takes the blanket and wraps Chengle in it while Airplane slips away again, this time to the kitchen. The boy curls up, hiccuping softly, wrapped in the plush fabric with thick tears in his eyes.

“I don’t want to be bad,” Chengle hiccups after a long moment of crying. His eyes are swollen, and his little face is so sad it’s almost like stepping back to those days, to that thin, distressed child, his emotions raw and painful. “I didn’t want to fight Xian-jie. But I was scared,” he hiccups again, his pout trembling. “I don’t want Baba to replace me.”

Shen Yuan shakes his head. He gently kisses the top of the boy's head, holding him as tightly as he can. Chengle reciprocates, hugging him back, letting himself be comforted like this; Shen Yuan feels as if he's almost melting into him, as if they could both merge on the sofa, embraced and covered by the plush fabric. It wouldn't be a bad thing.

“I will never replace you,” Shen Yuan promises, and Chengle’s hiccup comes with a sob. “I swear. You will always be my baby, my child, *my son*. I love you and I promise I will always be with you, and you will always be with me,” and the promise, every word, is an absolute reality.

He knows he's said similar things before, but honestly, he doesn't care. No matter how many times he has to repeat it, no matter how many times Chengle opens up to receive comfort, Shen Yuan will tell him and will be there for him until his child feels safe enough to no longer doubt or fear.

He knows it's a long road to get there; Shen Yuan knows pain, and even if it's something different, it's *not* something that will heal in a day or two. In this world, unlike the one Chengle comes from, pain takes its time to exist, to demand, to take. Chengle may come from a world where bones heal in days through qi or healers, but it's true that his wounded little heart couldn't have healed there even in years. Shen Yuan wouldn't be surprised if, were Chengle to stay in that place, he became just like the distrustful, suspicious, and hostile Luo Binghe that Shen Yuan had met long ago.

The great thing about Shen Yuan's world (besides the internet, therapy, technological advancements, and greater conveniences) is that no one expects pain to heal in a day or two. Shen Yuan never expected the pain of abandonment to be something Chengle could heal quickly, or on his own. And he'll probably need therapy, too, if he can even show Mu Qingfang enough of therapeutic spaces so he doesn't terrify any mortal child therapists with palaces, harems, and Heavenly Demons.

His child has a wound, and now, in his arms, Shen Yuan doesn't mind telling him over and over again how much he loves him, and how irreplaceable he is, as many times as necessary until he can gradually heal.

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

Despite his emotional outburst, Chengle takes a little less time to calm down than usual; Shen Yuan considers that an achievement in itself. That his sweet boy can calm down more quickly, find deeper comfort and a safer place in his arms, is already a demonstration of how much this wounded child has chosen to trust him. That, in itself, feels like a gift.

Airplane returns with two cups of warm milk with honey and a large pile of bunny apples, and Shen Yuan can almost forgive him for being a coward when it comes to tears. What's more, Airplane helps Chengle wash his face, splashes him with cold water, and makes the boy giggle a little, so Shen Yuan supposes that Airplane does have his strengths after all. They just aren't in shedding tears or comforting children with wounds the foolish writer probably hasn't recovered from himself, if the legible traumas in his atrocious writing are anything to go by.

Then it's a *fairly* normal afternoon. Shen Yuan orders dessert for everyone. Nothing a little sugar after a few (many) tears can't help! He's already had his fill of tears for the day, and probably the *whole week,* thanks. Not that he's against crying or anything, of course! He's a modern, rather unconventional man—tears are perfectly normal for everyone! It's just, *well.* Shen Yuan is more used to *seeing* tears (especially with Chengle in his life) than being the one who sheds them.

Anyway. Dessert!

Dessert arrives with a cup of hot chocolate for Airplane and Chengle. Then, Airplane settles down next to them on the sofa, the tap-tap-tap of his fingers on the keyboard of the laptop that sways on his lap barely a constant background noise, easy to ignore as Shen Yuan puts on *Hercules.*

Luo Chengle snuggles up and they watch the movie, exchanging a few random comments and jokes, and only then, surrounded by such comfort, his chest lightened of something so heavy that Shen Yuan hadn't realized he was carrying until he could finally let go, can Shen Yuan hold his son a little tighter, rocking him to the rhythm of the film's cheerful muses song as Chengle chuckles. Who needs normality when he has *this*? If he were… the way he's supposed to be, he wouldn't have any of this. It's okay to give up being considered normal just to have his sweet child.

The film ends, and Shen Yuan helps build a Lego zoo for the tiny, movable wooden beasts. As he builds as much as he can with one hand, Chengle seems incredibly excited to share every detail about the beasts he knows, and Shen Yuan thoroughly enjoys every passionate detail. His whole face glows, and his child is the most radiant thing in the world, blossoming like a spring flower under his care.

When dinnertime arrives, Shen Yuan heats up three dishes from what Luo Binghe has stored in his containers. They are tasty noodles with a light sauce; Shen Yuan adds a little broth while serving meatballs to Chengle and Airplane, and both thoroughly enjoy their meal.

"You can stay tonight," Shen Yuan says, gesturing to the sofa where Airplane has barely moved since Chengle went to take his bath before bed, though his hair is still clipped back. In fact, Airplane seems to be typing almost nervously, his rapid movements unstoppable. He must be on a roll, and *the last thing Shen Yuan* wants is to interrupt him, but… "I think you could move out permanently by March. I've been thinking about what new places to look for."

"Wow, really?" and Airplane seems quite excited by that, a goofy grin spreading across his face. He even looks up from his screen, the white square of his writing reflected in his eyes as

he glances at him. “Did you see any good apartments?”

“Not exactly,” he says, taking another seat. He’s gone to get his medication and the electric blanket, mostly to ease the tension in his back. It might not be *that much* pain, but it’s there, impossible to ignore for long. “Actually, I was thinking about some houses. I think a house would be… more convenient,” he says, shrugging.

The idea of owning a house still carries that weight of excess. It still feels like too much, even if Shen Yuan isn’t sure what “too much” even means. Isn't it normal for even single people without children to buy houses? Why does the fact that he's considering a house, rather than a comfortable, modern apartment, make it feel like too much? Still, *he can't* think only of himself and his comforts; this apartment isn't small, and it has all the amenities he needs. However, now he's not alone. Shen Yuan has a child, *a family.* Thinking about his own comforts is no longer the only thing he should be thinking about.

Focusing on finding apartments that were suitable for the space they now need was always pretty stupid.

“A house,” and Airplane whistles, the goofy grin plastered across his face. “Cucumber-bro, will you give me my own room for when I visit?”

“You’ll use the guest room like a normal person,” Shen Yuan huffs, trying not to laugh at Airplane’s ridiculous pout. It really is *pathetic,* but he’s still like… his best friend. Or something. “Although you can choose your mattress,” he concedes slightly, “since you’ll be the one using it most.”

“Yes!” and Airplane raises both fists, celebrating. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes before hitting him with a pillow.

He sits beside him, watching TV. The screen flashes a series of commercials—weather, media scandals… the usual. Shen Yuan watches almost without seeing, without enough energy to reach for the remote and change or even turn off the screen. Perhaps it is with that same meager energy, with his overwhelmed brain only half functioning, that he manages to murmur: “Airplane.”

“Mn?” Airplane hums absentmindedly. He’s started typing again, though not as fast—more as if he were reading and correcting over the words than as if he were conjuring them from scratch.

Shen Yuan takes a long, necessary breath before mustering up the courage to say: “I think I’m… gay.”

“Huh?” Airplane abruptly stops typing. His face is quite confused. “Is that news? Because—” But whatever Airplane plans to say is drowned out by the venomous glare Shen Yuan gives him. The hack author chokes on his words, coughs, and with a slightly red face says, “Hey. *Hey*! Congrats on, uh… coming out? Or realizing it?”

Shen Yuan sighs, rolling his eyes. He nudges him with his elbow.

“No,” he murmurs, shrugging. He doesn’t even know why he said it. Actually, Shen Yuan supposes, it’s the kind of thing that *shouldn’t* be said. But *it’s* Airplane. If anyone’s going to judge him, it’s definitely not him. “Just. I think that. And I figured I had to tell someone.”

Airplane hums. It sounds less like absentminded humming and more like a thoughtful sound. Shen Yuan glances at him, and the foolish author has an almost silly grin on his face. Shen Yuan might as well hit him again with a harder pillow if he keeps smiling like that.

“Well, *I’m* gay,” Airplane says, shrugging like it’s no big deal. Shen Yuan could hit him with a stack of Legos, seriously. To say that so casually, no doubt about it! “I thought you already knew, but hey. High five.”

“I should have known,” Shen Yuan says, swatting Airplane’s raised hand away. “*No* straight man would write such terrible papapa scenes with women. Seriously, *it’s completely obvious* there’s no attraction to *any* of those women. They’re just repetitive scenarios, practically copy-pasted, stupidly recycled scenes with just changing details and names! And sometimes, not even names!” Shen Yuan clicks his tongue, utterly *annoyed.* “I remind you that with wife 291, you literally copy-pasted replacing wife 183’s name, because right there in the middle of all the descriptions was the *other* wife’s name! What kind of hack writer does that?!”

Far from looking scared, intimidated, or irritated, Airplane actually looks *radiant.* It's a ridiculous, stupidly happy face, and Shen Yuan is about to whack him with his cane and tell him that if he's going to be a masochist, he should at least be one for something serious when Airplane, practically abandoning his laptop, throws himself into a hug so tight that Shen Yuan lets out an undignified, startled squeal.

“Oh, bro!” Airplane looks so *happy* that Shen Yuan gives him a grimace. What the hell? “I knew you were still there!”

“Let me go!” Shen Yuan pushes him away, or at least tries to, because Airplane is sticking to him like a damn octopus. “What’s wrong with your head now, huh? Ridiculous.”

Airplane sips, and Shen Yuan stays still, trying to steady his breathing. He hopes, *prays,* that the idiot Airplane isn't crying.

“Bro,” Airplane’s voice is wet. He takes another sob, and Shen Yuan makes *another* grimace. “I missed you so much.”

“Ridiculous,” Shen Yuan repeats, tapping him on the head with his knuckles. It’s barely painful, and the dumb writer just laughs a wet laugh. “What are you talking about? You watch me practically all the time.”

Airplane doesn't respond. Shen Yuan huffs, letting himself be hugged until the foolish author gets fed up. It's not *unpleasant.* With a sigh, he supposes it's not so bad either. He lets Airplane hug him and soak his shoulder with pathetic tears with a resigned exhalation. After such a hectic, chaotic and emotionally charged day, this isn't so bad.

It's not bad to have a friend.

· ⋆ · ⊹ ✦ ⊹ · ⋆ ·

Shen Yuan wakes up early. Snow is painting the morning white, and the window is completely fogged over, which is pleasant to look at if it weren't for the icy dampness. Chengle is still asleep, snuggled up among warm blankets and stuffed tigers, and Shen Yuan gives him a little kiss on the forehead before getting out of bed, his muscles creaking.

He wraps himself in a thick sweater and grips his cane a little too tightly. Airplane is sprawled out, asleep and snoring softly on his sofa, covered with two different blankets. Shen Yuan suppresses his urge to tease him only because the dark circles under the foolish author's eyes are never pleasant to look at.

Back in the kitchen, he puts the water on to boil; he's sure the rare medicinal teas Mu Qingfang gave him must be around here somewhere, and if he's lucky, Binghe left him some kind of instruction on which one to take and for what. In any case, he takes his small morning dose of regular pharmaceutical pills with some warm water and heats up a stuffed bun, just so he doesn't have to take the medicine on an empty stomach.

Shen Yuan finds the box of medicinal teas in one of the high drawers and, opening it, discovers a note from Binghe. He has *indeed* separated everything into the exact doses, in small, folded paper envelopes. Each envelope has its respective identifying character written on it, such as “pain,” “sleep,” “nausea,” “severe pain,” “fever”; Shen Yuan can see Binghe’s handwriting on *each one.* The man has *truly* gone to the trouble not only of separating and packing the correct doses but also of labeling them precisely so that Shen Yuan can access them.

The note on top of all the folded envelopes is written in Binghe's exquisite and neat calligraphy, a simple *"I hope A-Yuan isn't feeling too bad. Please bundle up and take good care of yourself,"* which makes Shen Yuan feel almost feverish, his face and ears burning. How ridiculous! Of course he's going to take the medicinal tea Luo Binghe makes for him because he's feeling bad!

…even so, it's incredibly heartwarming that… that Binghe *cares*. Because *he's* Luo Binghe, and yes, of course, Shen Yuan has read about how Luo Binghe embarks on adventures, traveling across realms in search of strange flowers, elixirs, answers—anything necessary to save one of his wives (and if he happens to find another wife along the way, well, that's part of the plot!). But hey! Airplane has never once dedicated a single word to a meticulous Luo Binghe, sitting at his desk, folding papers into makeshift envelopes in which he would separate each of the appropriate dosages, writing on each one individually what it was for. Shen Yuan holds the small envelope between his fingers, his heart heavy and his throat tight for longer than is probably advisable, because the water is boiling, rattling the kettle lid, and now he has to wait for it to cool a little so he won’t burn the herbs.

He is really…

Shen Yuan prepares his tea. When the water is no longer boiling, he pours it into his cup and pulls his chair up to the counter. He watches the water change color in the glass cup and, with a silly grin, thinks that he never even owned that ridiculous glass cup. That at some point, just to reassure him that he wasn't adding blood to his tea, Luo Binghe simply… obtained from

some source a completely transparent cup, the exact size for the doses of medicinal tea, and of course, perfectly suited to Shen Yuan's need for peace of mind.

He can't stop thinking about how foolish he feels and how ridiculously far Luo Binghe has been going for *him.* It's not that he's unaccustomed to his family worrying—in fact, Jiu-ge worries *a lot.* It's just so strange that Luo Binghe would do it, not because he thinks he can't or because Shen Yuan feels he doesn't deserve it, it's just...it's *odd* that someone who isn't family would care so much about him.

But after all, Luo Binghe *is* family, isn't he? Not in the same way as his siblings or his parents, but *he is* family. It's the family he has chosen. It's the path he has chosen to follow.

Shen Yuan covers his face with his hands. He doesn't have the same nervous, tense energy that would require a pillow to scream under, but his glasses are too fogged up by the heat of his own face to be able to face *anything.*

These are not good thoughts to have so early in the morning.

What he can do at this hour, instead of having a ridiculous gay panic (he's getting used to it!! He's not going to jump into the cold pool for a swim!! No way!), is look for *houses*. And that's much more emotionally accessible.

Browsing available homes isn't so boring anymore, especially now that he can actually picture what to expect. Photos of houses for sale on different real estate agencies show many furnished, others furnished only for decoration and sales purposes, and a few look as if the owners died there after neglecting that suspicious stain on the wall for the last ten years.

It's a bit more entertaining. He sips his medicinal tea and snoops around, noting down names and contact information for real estate agents, checking out agencies and houses that have the basics to make his calls. His checklist is short: close to any medical center with an emergency room, close to any park, close to any urban area with markets or restaurants. Yes, Luo Binghe is a wonderful cook, but Shen Yuan *isn't going* to leave the cooking to him alone, and it's easier to find good restaurants than to learn on his own!

He finds a couple of houses that look… pretty good. Well, actually, it's true that some look better than others, but the positive thing is that they mostly meet the necessary requirements. Three of them even have a backyard! And while none has a garden as large as the palace gardens, one of them has a tree that could provide some nice shade. It's also the furthest from the main shopping areas, but only a five-minute drive from a hospital and ten minutes from the rest of civilization. Another one is just a couple of blocks from a park with a playground that looks wonderful…

There are a lot of things to consider, really. Not just the houses themselves, but whether Shen Yuan will have easy access to them. A nice floor, no stairs—maybe he should buy a car? Despite Jiu-ge's protests, Shen Yuan *has* his driver's license… whether he enjoys using it is another matter entirely! But buying a house *and* a car would actually mean even his parents would force him to attend a few extra hours of office meetings to excuse the fact that he's not in dirty business or something.

Shen Yuan sighs deeply. His teacup is filled with leaves at the bottom, and he can't find any meaningful shapes in them. A sign, a hint from fate? What is fate's contact number, really? Something to tell him what the best course of action will be?

It's not like communicating with Something Higher or whatever is easy; Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. His muscles ache a little less, and his head feels just a tiny bit lighter, with that extra touch of relaxation the xianxia medicine leaves behind, its bitter aftertaste lingering in his mouth. Maybe that's why he's thinking about so much nonsense. What does the floor of a house matter? If he likes the damn house, he has enough money not only to pay for it but to *customize it* to his damn needs. Something he can't do with an apartment (and hell, Jiu-ge tried, but even they have to comply with building regulations!).

This will be *their* home. He will find a place he likes, a place that feels *comfortable*, and if it doesn't have what he needs, *he'll* get it. He'll make this place *his own.* Shen Yuan feels a little less silly and a little more like he's up to no good as he flips through the pages and looks at the houses that appeal to him. He keeps some, discards others immediately. He wants a big place, but not *too* big: a place he can walk in a short time but that feels spacious. A place where Shen Yuan can imagine Luo Chengle growing up, with a comfortable, large kitchen where his little family can all settle in to help and watch Luo Binghe cook, with a cozy space where Shen Yuan can watch his child play and enjoy some real peace.

Shen Yuan is aware that he isn't the most optimistic person in the world, nor does he have the highest expectations for any situation or for it to turn out well. However, he is absolutely certain of one thing: it's completely impossible for him to *ruin* this. Neither he nor *anything else* can ruin it. Finding a house is just the beginning of a more comfortable life that is about to begin with his family.

⋆ ⊹ ✦ ⊹ ⋆

Airplane leaves after a hearty breakfast, mumbling half-baked excuses that lead Shen Yuan to believe the foolish author probably received a mystical message from beyond (or, at best, a text message) from a certain ice demon. Shen Yuan doesn't get his hopes up that Mobei Jun's return means Luo Binghe is back; though he does hope, after all, that he won't be *too long.* In truth… he's not sure if being away from him for too long will help or make things worse when he finally sees him again.

Luo Chengle is the only one who seems genuinely happy to have Shen Yuan all to himself, and all Shen Yuan can do is hug him with all his might. The boy doesn't want to make things difficult for him, and he's tied his hair back in a high ponytail with a red scrunchie that's twisted more to one side than the other, and Shen Yuan just thinks he's the cutest little boy he's *ever seen.*

Shen Yuan lets his son enjoy a quiet morning. They watch a couple of episodes of Cardcaptor Sakura and then play hide-and-seek with the tigers, which is much funnier than it sounds. Some of the tigers seem to understand perfectly well how to hide, while others, like innocent cats, simply believe that if they close their eyes, they're invisible. This is absolutely adorable and gets a good laugh from both of them. Shen Yuan lets Chengle win, though he's *not entirely* sure he would have won if he'd really tried.

When Shen Yuan starts to feel more exhausted and in pain than able to stand without his knees burning, he changes his approach to the game. He draws some monstrous birds for Chengle to color, and then they create a monster together, which looks like a strange, multicolored penguin but has several pairs of wings: some for swimming, some for flying, and some for camouflaging itself like a chameleon.

Shen Yuan hasn't the slightest idea if something like that is even possible, but it's extremely fun, and they spend another long while (while Shen Yuan heats up lunch and makes some rice) trying to come up with a name. Shen Yuan decides, partly to honor the original creator of all these creatures, that Three-Winged Penguin *isn't* a bad name after all. Chengle likes it quite a bit, and that's what matters.

Only once they're halfway through eating, Chengle swinging his little feet in slippers under the table, does Shen Yuan realize he has a conversation he *can't* postpone. With a deep breath, he steels himself for the absolutely necessary courage before beginning:

"Chengle, sweetie, can I ask you an important question?"

Luo Chengle looks at him with his large, soft eyes for only a moment before going into a defensive, ferocious mode.

"I didn't break it!" he says so fast that Shen Yuan has to cover his mouth with his hand to hide the widening grin on his face. "Uncle Ai-plein wanted to play with it! And it didn't work anymore! And then he said that if I said he touched it, he'd blame me! But I didn't!"

The child pouts deeply. He doesn't seem ready to cry, and Shen Yuan bites back his smile, trying not to burst out laughing at the poor boy.

"What were you playing?" he asks. Chengle pouts even more.

"That gaming phone," he says, looking away. "The one with buttons!"

"The Nintendo SD?" Shen Yuan can't help laughing. "Ah, you didn't break anything. I haven't used it in months," and he feels a little silly about it. "It probably just ran out of battery. Don't worry, you're not grounded. Besides," and he reaches out to pat his sweet son's head, "you know you can play with anything you want, as long as you tell me."

"But it was Uncle Ai-plein," Luo Chengle protests, pouting again. That sweet face, those big eyes, and that crooked ponytail almost made Shen Yuan's heart ache. His little boy was so adorable!

"Your Uncle Airplane would know it's not broken by turning off," Shen Yuan hums, and the boy pouts again, clearly caught out. Shen Yuan can't hide a little laugh this time. "Did you hide it or put it back?"

"I put it back," Chengle said, rocking back and forth in his chair. "If it's not broken, won't Baba scold me?"

“Of course not,” Shen Yuan replies, moving the plate of dumplings closer to Chengle. The boy takes two more for his plate, then pushes it toward Shen Yuan; he accepts one with a crooked smile. “But you should have told me if you were worried. I wasn’t going to be upset. You know that, right?”

Chengle's mouth is full of rice now, but he nods, moving his head rapidly. He's adorable, and Shen Yuan has to restrain himself from pinching his cheek. Ah, that sweet child…

Although he can't get distracted. Not too much. He takes another deep breath before saying, "Although that's not what I wanted to talk to you about."

Chengle, now, seems a little more worried. His small eyebrows furrow.

“Does Baba have to go back to the hospital?” he asks. Shen Yuan quickly shakes his head, and Chengle seems *much* more relieved now. “I don’t like hospitals,” the boy complains, and Shen Yuan can only agree.

“Me neither,” he hums, and after a small smile, decides to go before his poor child gets even more frightened trying to guess. “It’s just a question, okay?” And when his child nods, Shen Yuan hesitates only a little. The courage he’s mustered is gone, but *he needs* Do it. Like a band-aid, he supposes, the faster the better. “I just want to know. How did my sweet boy come up with the marriage points?”

Luo Chengle blinks, as if he doesn't quite grasp the question, or the exact *reason* for it. He stuffs his cheeks with a dumpling, and after eating, fiddling with his chopsticks, Chengle shrugs and says, “Baba is sad when Father Emperor isn't around. And Father Emperor is... not *so* bad,” and makes a face that is clearly one of displeasure. “They make each other happy. And if they make each other happy, they have to get married,” and the boy shrugs, as if it were the most logical conclusion. Shen Yuan doesn't quite agree yet, but he's too dizzy to agree or disagree. "But Father Emperor is still *bad.* Even if he's a little less bad. He leaves and sometimes looks at Baba *strangely*. And Baba is *very* good. And if Father Emperor really wants to marry Baba Yuan, he has to accumulate many, many marriage points that make Baba very happy and not be bad and be a good father and not have a cold heart like before."

It's… so simple, in Chengle's eyes. Shen Yuan sighs, trying to suppress his dizziness. He hasn't lost his appetite, so it's more… mental than anything else. He's not used to, and doesn't think he'll get used to it anytime soon, not wanting to make excuses in situations like this. It's not a situation that can be excused.

Shen Yuan takes *another* deep breath before venturing to say, “And how do you feel about that? Does it make you feel bad?”

Luo Chengle pouts and nods. Then he shakes his head.

“I don’t know,” the boy says, frowning and pouting. “I don’t like him,” he says, which is clear, “but he makes Baba happy.” The way he says it makes Shen Yuan’s heart *ache.* “And when Father Emperor looks at Baba and is happy too, I feel happy. And I like Father Emperor *a little bit* more.”

Shen Yuan tries to smile in a way that doesn't sound hysterical. He reaches across the table to take Chengle's small, soft hand in his own.

"Well, does Chengle remember the rules of this world?" he asks. Chengle tilts his head slightly, curious, and Shen Yuan smiles reassuringly as he says, "A man cannot marry someone he just met. *Nor* can he have many wives. And before marriage, they must be two people who know each other very well…"

"Yes!" Chengle smiles so broadly that Shen Yuan can only smile back. "Yes, *yes*! They don't get married for years and years! And only if the relationship is going very well!"

"What a good kid," Shen Yuan hums, and his little Luo Chengle puffs himself up like a peacock strutting. "Such a good memory and paying such close attention."

Shen Yuan pauses for a moment. He takes a sip of water, controlling his breathing and the heat that threatens to rise in his face. He's *not* saying he's going to marry Luo Binghe; hell, it's not even *legal* in the country. He's just… testing the waters. Really talking to his son about something that's important to him, to *both of them.* It's clear that Chengle still doesn't think highly of his father, despite everything, and perhaps because of all those chaotic, conflicting feelings. Shen Yuan can never blame his boy for still distrusting Luo Binghe: after all, his abandonment wound wouldn't be *so* deep if his damned father had been more present.

"Baba is going to marry Father Emperor, isn't he?" And when Chengle asks, in a low voice, he doesn't look like he's trying to get a reaction. There are no teary eyes trying to get his way, no real tears trying to express pain. There's no pout or worried eyebrows. What there is, however, genuine curiosity on his face, big, innocent eyes, full of questions.

Ah, Shen Yuan wishes he had more answers.

"I don't know," he says, and it's clear that this isn't the answer his son was looking for or hoping for, but he seems to be making a great effort not to sulk about it. The great effort fails spectacularly, of course. "It's… too many adult things to consider," he says, because he's not going to explain half the things going through his head to his son. It would be beyond complicated to explain not only the whole concept of just coming out (or being dragged out) of the closet, having to acknowledge that maybe he wasn't the person he thought he was all along, or all the… complicated stuff about the harem and the fact that Luo Binghe might have kissed him, but *what* exactly did that entail? "But I won't be marrying him anytime soon. If it happens, *if it* ever does, it'll be a long, long time from now."

Although it is somewhat vague, it seems to slightly calm Luo Chengle's sulking.

"I know *that*," Chengle says, and he seems quite happy to say it. "Father Emperor hasn't earned any of that yet. He still doesn't deserve to marry Baba." Then his grumbling expression turns into an almost sad one. "I don't like the palace because of it. Everyone calls Baba as if he's already married to Father Emperor. And that's not *right*. He hasn't earned it yet! He hasn't done well enough! It's not right for him to have something he hasn't earned!"

Shen Yuan sighs. He reaches out to ruffle his son's hair, gently pinching his cheek as he does so. The large, dark eyes that gaze at him are so full of emotion that they seem to glow with

unique brilliance. He has eyes so like his father's, and yet a gaze as sweet and innocent as only he can. Shen Yuan adores him *so much*.

“I don’t like it either,” he confesses, and Chengle smiles. “But I like correcting them all the time even less. You know what you Nainai used to tell me? That every moment I waste with dumb people is a moment I don’t gain with people I love.”

“Nainai is very wise,” Chengle says, after letting out a soft “*ohh*” so tender that Shen Yuan might just bite his cheek. In truth, spending time with Sha Hualing has really messed up his perception of how to show affection… “But Father Emperor hasn’t earned it yet. It’s not fair.”

“Maybe he’ll never win,” Shen Yuan remarks, as if trying to offer him a glimmer of hope. Who says anything about a wedding anyway? Shen Yuan wouldn’t mind. It’s not like it’s legal or necessary.

“That won’t happen,” Luo Chengle says, pouting in a nearly resigned expression. “Father Emperor *always* wins. And he always gets what he wants. But that’s okay, because Baba will be happy. And I want Baba to be the happiest.”

Shen Yuan sighs. In that, his sweet boy is right; it is Luo Binghe they are talking about, after all. If he wants… for some *crazy* reason, to marry Shen Yuan, because apparently now his favorite character, who turned into his most hated *person* after realizing what a bad father he was, and evolved from a detestable man who progressed to being tolerable to his second favorite person after his son, *wants* to marry Shen Yuan. Or at least have what he knows as a wedding. Or anything under the concepts that Luo Binghe can associate with kisses and… what happens afterward.

If Luo Binghe wants something, *he gets it*. That’s just a fact. Not just a fact of the world, also a fact of *Luo Binghe himself,* something that defines and completes him. If the world doesn't give him what he wants, he'll get it, no matter what the cost. And Shen Yuan believes that feeling overwhelmed by this *is* perfectly normal.

The fact that… Luo Binghe seems attractive to him is *light years* away from *marriage*. He's barely even understanding what's going on in his head! No one should push him to swim when he’s just starting to notice the water! But he knows it's a *necessary conversation.* After all, Chengle is, and always will be, his *priority*. And even though the boy looks a little grumpy but resigned, *he seems* to agree. Agree that Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe together as… as… as *something* could be something that's okay to happen.

Shen Yuan shakes his head, gently stroking Chengle's cheek before retrieving his chopsticks. He wishes he had some certainty or answer to give his sweet boy, something to cheer them both up, but he truly has nothing that could put them at ease. He also has too many questions, too many doubts, and too many things to think about; however, reassuring Chengle that he won't suffer if… if *something* happens, is the greatest relief.

His poor child already had a past with a father who abandoned him and a mother who fell ill, and both wounded his heart. Shen Yuan will not repeat those mistakes; he may make any other mistake, and he will own up to it and be responsible, but if his child has such a deep

wound that he cannot accept Luo Binghe being *close to him,* Shen Yuan might continue to play dumb and pretend for his child's sake.

However, his son isn't *so* opposed. It's more as if he's waiting, hoping that Luo Binghe will simply change to get what he wants. And that… that's *something.* Something that leaves Shen Yuan with a future full of questions, with no idea what to do, and no clue how he'll react or what he'll say to Luo Binghe when he sees him again.

Well, he supposes he has some time to figure it out. In the meantime, his priority is, and always will be, his son, and making him happy. After all the crying and pain, his child deserves it.

Chapter End Notes

SY: So, I've been thinking about this a lot recently and... I think I'm gay
Airplane: .....that was some news??

SY: *criticizes Airplane's bad writing*
Airplane: AH, CUCUMBER-BRO, I KNEW YOU WERE STILL IN THERE IN THAT DEPRESSIVE SHELL T_T

SY: Okay, so what does my child think about... his father being interested in marrying me or... whatever that is?
Chengle: *sighs in resignation* Father Emperor already convinced Baba, right? :c

DAMN I SO ENJOYED Shen Yuan FINALLY accepting himself. I mean, even if on SVSSS he just says, "Ha, it's just Binghe, it's not gay if he's Binghe, who wouldn't be sexually attracted to him if he's objectively the most handsome man in the whole world?", our Shen Yuan has a therapist and his capacity for acceptance of his surroundings remains intact. A child entered his life? Well, he guesses he's a father now. A bunch of other children's mothers are now his friends? Well, he guesses he needs a big house where his entire new extended family can also fit. A therapist drags him out of the closet? Okay, now he's gay. Moving on
I adore Shen Yuan's adaptability lol silly boy, I want to pinch his cheeks

I find it extremely funny that Shen Yuan simply adapts to the fact that "okay, so, I guess I'm gay now," and 90% of his life's problems feel lighter. I think (in my personal opinion) that when you accept something about yourself that you're very conflicted about, it's much easier for everything else to feel lighter or for things to weigh less. It's not like Shen Yuan accepting his sexuality makes him less depressed or anything like that, but it's simply that this makes his other problems less tied to his desperate denial and feeling of "being normal" according to societal standards. He's already accepted that he's outside those standards. All that's left is for him to accept all the problems he has and work with them, and surprisingly, it will be easier right now :3

I'm trying to explain my train of thought because I don't want you to think there's a magic gay label that cures depression /j

MWAH, I HOPE YOU LIKED THE CHAPTER! Thank you so much for reading :D I really enjoyed writing it, especially returning to the comfortable domesticity of Chengle and Shen Yuan. It felt a bit like the first chapters of this journey, and I'm happy :3 Ah, you know!! I'm just a comment-kudo-interaction away! Your comments make me so happy and brighten my life ;3
See you soon!! :D

Chapter 40: Third one is not a crowd

Chapter Notes

GUESS WHO'S BACK
Part of me thinks I'm capable of doing a kind of 'upload a chapter daily until Christmas, heck, I did it once, I can do it again.' Another part of me is MOCKING ME. Who will win? We'll find out tomorrow!
ALSO! With this chapter, I've officially published OVER one million words on AO3 this year. Counting all my published fics, only the published ones, and I want you to know that NONE OF THIS could have been anything I did without your support, comments, company, and interest. I'm so happy and grateful, truly. MWAH

Warnings for this chapter: Mildly depressive thoughts, mentions of poisoning

Enjoy the chapter! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning feels considerably colder; it's true that the days have only been getting colder, and they'll probably get worse. The chill seeps through the windowpanes, and Shen Yuan sighs as he forces himself to his feet, his muscles taut, his eyes still slightly squinty, as he staggers to turn up the heat and go to the bathroom. It's not a day filled with pain, more a superficial feeling of tension throughout, and Shen Yuan can only be grateful: truly, doing absolutely nothing is doing his body far too well.

Only when he leaves the bathroom to prepare something hot to warm up before returning to bed does Shen Yuan catch a whiff of the rich scent of something *cooking*. The morning is quiet, and no other lights are on. The clear light spilling through the windows is almost an icy glow, as if snow were filtering through the overcast morning. The kitchen light is also off, and the only light that enters comes from the wide windows at the far end of his small kitchen, a soft halo enveloping Luo Binghe's figure as he cooks with his back to him.

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath. Just standing there in the doorway, observing the lines of his back visible through his tight black sweater and the way his hair is pulled back into a ponytail, Shen Yuan can feel his heart lurch and collapse. Ha! Ha! Who's awake?! Not Shen Yuan! Sleepwalker! He didn't see anything! He can't *face* any of this! Not yet!!

However, Shen Yuan doesn't manage to slip away. He knows he hasn't *exactly been* quiet, pacing back and forth with his cane, and there's no way Luo Binghe hasn't heard him, but even so, when Luo Binghe turns around, a gentle smile on his face, Shen Yuan still wants to lift a rug and hide underneath. It's not fair! It's *too* early to face *anything*! Theory is one thing, practice is another!

Luo Binghe is… he's the same as always. He's just as handsome as ever, with the same unparalleled beauty. Is it strange that he looks even more attractive with his hair tied back and his sleeves rolled up to his elbows? Probably very strange.

Shen Yuan can't stop *staring.* It's as if he's always been looking, but only after a slap of reality is his brain truly able to grasp what his eyes are focusing on. His clothes fit him exactly the same as they did a week ago, but it's as if Shen Yuan can notice the precise way his muscles strain against the fabric, or the way the exposed muscles of his forearms tense, the bluish veins running down his arms and into his hands, the way his pale skin contrasts almost blindingly against the dark clothing, and how damn cute that stray curl looks that's escaped his ponytail and fallen across his forehead.

It's as if Shen Yuan *can't stop staring at him.* He's always looked at him, but never *really looked* at him, and now it's as if his ridiculous brain is mocking him, because the warm, sweet expression Luo Binghe gives him the moment they first see each other almost makes him collapse, his knees buckling. Illegal!! Too soon to deal with something like this!! A pause, please!

Luo Binghe's warm expression freezes for a moment. Then he crosses the room toward him in extremely quick steps. Shen Yuan feels his heart pounding against his chest. Too much, *too much—*

"Is A-Yuan alright?" he asks, his brows furrowed with concern. Shen Yuan feels like he's choking. Is it that obvious?! Ridiculously obvious? Is he making a complete fool of himself?! "Your hand…"

Shen Yuan glances down at the splint on his hand. He opens his mouth, but no words come out. Oh, *right.* His hand. In a splint. And the closest thing to splints that Luo Binghe or anyone in the Xianxia world would recognize is splinting broken bones. Shen Yuan feels so pathetic he almost bursts out laughing. He'd literally forgotten about his damn sprained wrist.

"Oh," Shen Yuan gasps, shaking his head. Mental clarity. Couldn't he just open a window?! …No, he just turned up the heat because of the cold. He *really* shouldn't open a window, even though that would freeze his thoughts, and that would be *perfect.* Shen Yuan clears his throat nervously. "It's nothing. Uh, well, actually, it is," he says quickly, before Luo Binghe steps forward to test his perception of nothing. "My wrist is sprained. Jiu-ge made me an appointment at the hospital to check out all those things that make him paranoid, you know, and well, they did this to make me leave it alone…"

Shen Yuan feels like he's rambling. What he's saying makes sense, part of his brain knows it, but another part, the more stupidly irrational part, just wants to press his fingers against Luo Binghe's furrowed brow, slide them down his cheekbones, feel the cool softness of his face beneath his hands. He feels like an idiot, and much worse, like a shameless pervert. Luo Binghe isn't doing *anything*! He's standing there worried like a good… like a good person, and all Shen Yuan is thinking about is whether his lips under his fingers will be as soft and velvety as when he—

God, what's wrong with him?!

Luo Binghe's fingers are covered in flour. Casually, he wipes them on his pants before reaching out to hold the splint. Shen Yuan feels his entire face *burning.* He's not even touching his skin! He's not even directly touching him!! Is his brain messed up?!

"Does it hurt?" Luo Binghe asks. He's so close Shen Yuan can count his eyelashes, and when he looks up from his hand to his eyes, Shen Yuan feels like he's been stabbed. Too much, really!! "…A-Yuan?"

Shen Yuan swallows. He forces himself to answer: "A little," and he's being honest. He barely feels any pain, a subtle thing that's there, but not as much as if he were accidentally using his wrist all the time. Having the splint is a constant reminder to keep his wrist still, or at least not to strain it so much; as long as he doesn't strain it, there won't be any pain. "But it's hardly anything. I promise."

Luo Binghe sighs. The splint prevents him from checking Shen Yuan's pulse or anything else on his wrist, but he still holds his hand, and Shen Yuan feels an almost electric shiver at the mere touch of his fingers. His fingers remain in the palm of his hand, and Shen Yuan is extremely hyperaware of his heartbeat, of the possibility that he might be staggering and short of breath all at once. Of course, he isn't *actually staggering*, and he isn't short of breath, but his brain can barely process everything at the same time!

The pulse of qi that relieves his pain is almost like whiplash. Shen Yuan exhales, releasing a tension he wasn't even fully aware of. The pain gradually eases, and Luo Binghe's expression is a complicated thing even as he lets go, leaving Shen Yuan with only the electric sensation in his fingers, unsure whether to blame the qi or Luo Binghe himself.

"A-Yuan's bone isn't broken," Luo Binghe says, and although he sounds relieved, he doesn't sound *that* relieved. "But…"

"It's a sprain," Shen Yuan explains with a resigned sigh. "It's the ligaments. Uh, the thing that connects the bones in the joints. It's… pretty normal. I've sprained ankles and knees before, I promise it's not…" Seeing the growing concern on Luo Binghe's face, Shen Yuan stops speaking before the man can stop him again. He shakes his head and sighs. "I'll be fine, and I'll be very careful. I promise. You know, humans are fragile."

Luo Binghe takes another step forward. It's one step closer, but it's also the only step that separates them. Shen Yuan can feel the pounding of his heartbeat against his throat, buzzing loudly behind his ears. But Luo Binghe, now suddenly reminding himself that he can behave like a damned perfect gentleman, merely holds Shen Yuan's injured wrist in his hands with the most wretched expression Shen Yuan has ever seen on him.

…it can't be possible that he's also thinking about how attractive he looks with that expression. Shen Yuan is really trying his best, but he can barely control his thoughts and keep his mouth shut, lest he accidentally blurt out something stupid! Anyway, Luo Binghe always looks attractive! He's Luo Binghe!! What's the difference now, specifically!?

"This one knows," Luo Binghe says in a low, deeper voice, and Shen Yuan can barely suppress a shiver. Luo Binghe holds his hand in his own; Shen Yuan can see a few marks of flour on his knuckles, traces of dough still clinging to the backs of his hands. And he

probably can hardly stop staring at his hands, broad with long fingers, blue veins painted with barely any relief—but it's better than looking at his chest! Or his shoulders, or—!! "It's my fault. If this Lord hadn't neglected A-Yuan during his stay at the palace…"

"Hey, no!" Shen Yuan blurts out, interrupting with a voice more like a croak than normal words. Luo Binghe's expression is utterly guilty, and Shen Yuan manages to give him a light tap on the calf with his cane to startle him. Incredibly, it works. "Don't be silly, it wasn't your fault. You can't be held responsible for the actions of *others*," he complains.

"It's *my* fault," insists Luo Binghe, the enormous stubborn fellow. Shen Yuan snorts, but Luo Binghe lowers his head even further, preventing him from seeing his eyes, and well, that's wrong. Luo Binghe shouldn't have that kind of regretful look on his face over something as trivial as this! "If this Lord hadn't turned his back on A-Yuan…"

"Then don't do it next time," Shen Yuan sighed, simply resigned. Quick as lightning, Luo Binghe raised his head, his dark eyes gleaming with a strange, expectant excitement.

"Will A-Yuan come back to the Palace with me? Again?" The way Luo Binghe asks, the way his eyes sparkle, the strange pink glow on his face, makes it very difficult for Shen Yuan not to pat him on the cheek. One of his hands is trapped in Luo Binghe's, and the other is holding him to his cane, so it's not like he can anyway.

Shen Yuan shrugs, though.

"As long as you don't force me to stay, and respect my wishes when I want to leave, I'd follow you anywhere," he murmurs, looking away. He can feel the heat rising up his neck, turning his face red and burning, but who could blame him! The radiance on Luo Binghe's face would blind anyone! Too close, too bright! Utterly lethal!

Even as he avoids looking at his face, unwilling to be blinded by eyes that shine like star-filled nights, Luo Binghe seems to tremble, like a mountain about to collapse directly at his feet.

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Luo Binghe helps him to the chair set up in the kitchen. He makes him tea and, little by little, seems to relax enough to continue cooking with a carefree air. Shen Yuan can't complain; he… well, he doesn't really want to complain either. After his absence, he genuinely enjoys this. Having Luo Binghe in his kitchen, the way he seems to make any space feel warm and inviting just by being there. He enjoys this moment of peace and quiet with him as much as he would enjoy an afternoon of tea and conversation.

Shen Yuan had enjoyed more calm moments with Luo Binghe than he had in… his entire life, really. He had blamed it for too long on the fact that Luo Binghe was his favorite character, on the fact that his protagonist aura, even despite how unbearable Luo Binghe could be at times, prevented anyone from feeling uncomfortable around him.

However, Luo Binghe is *more* than just his favorite character, and he's not sure when, but he ceased to be just that so quickly and viscerally that only in retrospect can Shen Yuan truly see

it. Luo Binghe has gone from being his favorite character to a *terrible father,* a despicable person, someone human, and as human, as a *real* human, he has gradually learned. He has acknowledged his mistakes, learned to live with them, taken responsibility for changing what he can change, and resigned himself to the fact that he hasn't done things the right way in the past.

Luo Binghe has *grown.* Even in a short time, he has shown he understands where he went wrong. He has shown remorse. He has shown his willingness to do things differently. He has shown he wants to be a better father, a better Emperor, *a better person.*

Shen Yuan feels that… he can live with it. With *him*. With the situation. With the person Luo Binghe has become. It's no longer about having him around for Chengle's sake, so he has his father in his life, but… well. Shen Yuan isn't entirely sure how to handle his own feelings yet, but with the thought of Luo Binghe in his life, present, with *this* Luo Binghe who has chosen to change, who has chosen to break every cycle of abuse in his life, with this Luo Binghe who has grown as a father, as an individual, and as a man, accepting his mistakes and wanting to change them for the sake of the people he cares about, Shen Yuan is at peace with the idea of being able to share… something with him. Whatever that may be.

Luo Binghe is finishing making the dough buns. The sizzle of the oil as he fries the youtiao is loud, and the smell of frying makes Shen Yuan feel a little hungry—not that he can stand fried food yet, but Luo Binghe is holding out a small plate of chopped fruit before Shen Yuan can even voice that he's hungry, and his ridiculous, silly heart feels like it's going to burst inside his chest.

“So,” he murmurs, just to distract himself from his chaotic thoughts or the frantic beating of his heart, “how are things at the palace? Anything interesting?”

Luo Binghe hums. Shen Yuan can hear the smile on his face as he says:

“This one has been taking care of some minor issues within the harem,” Luo Binghe says, his voice a little playful, “especially since Xiao Gongzhu has been poisoned, her health in danger. Ah, you can imagine, A-Yuan, how difficult it was to search the pavilions for evidence, interrogating both wives and servants…” Shen Yuan nods, feeling his ears burning. At the same time, Luo Binghe simply says, “…And A-Yuan doesn’t seem surprised by that, from what I can see.”

“It’s Xiao Gongzhu,” Shen Yuan quickly replies, before looking even more guilty than he actually is. It’s not like he put the poison in her throat! And yes, he knows who did it! So what! “What surprises me most is that no one has tried to poison her *before.*”

Luo Binghe laughs. His laugh is relaxed, gentle, the kind of quiet laugh of someone who isn't at all worried about the health of one of his wives. Shen Yuan thinks he should feel bad, but it's not as if Xiao Gongzhu has done anything to earn his affection or even his concern.

“She’s still ill, and according to the royal healers, she’ll remain in that state until the poison clears from her body in a few weeks,” Luo Binghe explains, and Shen Yuan can feel a slight weight lifted from his shoulders. Well, he supposes he’ll still feel guilty if anything happens to her, whether she’s a bitch or not. “Unfortunately, she’ll recover.”

Luo Binghe sounds so disappointed by this that Shen Yuan can only laugh. He supposes that being widowed of such a troublesome wife is much easier and quicker than a divorce… if that's what Luo Binghe intends, of course! Not that Shen Yuan wants to force him to do any of that!

"This Lord has been making some new arrangements within the harem structure," Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan nearly jumps in his seat. He's certain he hasn't said or done anything to reveal his thoughts, but, eh, is he really that predictable? "This Lord… I don't need any more *wives.* The responsibility I've placed on my shoulders for their lives is more than I can bear without neglecting more valuable matters."

"That…" Shen Yuan hesitates. Luo Binghe is looking at him, tilting his head slightly. Two curls fall across his face, and Shen Yuan feels his breath catch in his throat. He looks away, his face burning. "What will you do about it?"

Even without looking at his face, Shen Yuan sees Luo Binghe shrug. "Only the mothers of my children will remain in the inner court," Luo Binghe explains. His tone is softer. He seems to be repeating a short, rehearsed speech. Shen Yuan almost laughs hysterically, imagining Luo Binghe rehearsing his words in front of a polished bronze mirror. "The highest-ranking wives will have the option of choosing whether they wish to remain at the imperial court serving in political matters, or whether they desire land and treasure to retire to a place of their own where they can do as they please. The middle and lower-ranking wives will receive a similar choice, but with offices for the palace, not the court."

Luo Binghe remains silent. Shen Yuan realizes, a couple of seconds later, that he is expectant. He hasn't moved, tense in his shoulders, rigid in his back. He is waiting for Shen Yuan's opinion on the matter, and Shen Yuan can only feel momentarily overwhelmed that Luo Binghe is waiting for *his opinion* on something so important.

"It's… a good decision, albeit a politically risky one," he murmurs. What does he know about empires and palaces? Not much! He only has the knowledge of novels to his name, and mostly not even very good ones! "Perhaps you should consider whether any of the wives in the harem might want revenge? Uh, you know, for giving a little more political power to others…"

"None of them will remain in the harem," Luo Binghe says abruptly, and Shen Yuan almost gasps as if he'd been punched in the gut. Pardon? What? "How could this Lord be a good father to his children if he's wasting his time on pointless conquests that neither foster their sense of belonging within their own family nor their children's trust in their father?"

"Those… those are very important words," is all Shen Yuan manages to say. He clears his throat, fiddling with the handle of his cane. Truly. *Truly.* Is Luo Binghe saying what he's saying? Is he abandoning the harem he fought so hard to build? Not just metaphorically, but *literally*! He had to fight beasts for at least half of those wives!

"Are they?" Luo Binghe asks. And when Shen Yuan looks up, it's because all he can find in Luo Binghe's voice is a seriousness that leaves him numb. Luo Binghe's eyes are deep, intense, and Shen Yuan feels trapped by his gaze in a way he can't describe. "I just… want to be better. I want to be someone worthy. Someone my children can look up to with the same

love and pride that Chengle looks up to A-Yuan." Shen Yuan blinks, overwhelmed. Isn't he… exaggerating a bit? Isn't it going a little too far to say these things? "I want to be better for them, better in the way A-Yuan is with Chengle and my other children. I want to be a worthy father, a worthy *man*. There's no space for any harem in a life that will make my children happy. I want to be… someone worthwhile."

Once again, the silence that stretches out is expectant. It's not tense. Shen Yuan forces himself to breathe, overwhelmed by the sheer number of absurd emotions he can't name but can't stop feeling either. He wants to throw his cane aside and throw himself upon Luo Binghe, hold him tightly in his arms, hug him until his muscles ache. Yet, he can't move.

All he can say is, "Thinking this way, I believe you already are."

The smile Luo Binghe gives him shines like the sun; then, the sizzling oil forces him to pay attention to the stove, taking the youtiao out before the fried dough burns. Shen Yuan pushes his fogged glasses away from his face, rubbing his cheeks before doing something ridiculous like crying tears of joy at how foolishly proud he feels of Luo Binghe and the person he has become.

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It's quite obvious that Luo Chengle isn't *all that* happy to see his Father Emperor first thing in the morning, even if it means fried youtiao, freshly made dumplings, and a better breakfast than Shen Yuan could ever make himself. The grumpy little boy has to drink a glass of warm milk and receive many kisses and hugs from Shen Yuan before he warms up a bit, but he remains perched on Shen Yuan's lap throughout breakfast, urging him to eat more fruit, more porridge, and more rice.

Luo Binghe isn't bothered by his son's grumpy reluctance. In fact, he's... calm. If Shen Yuan had to describe him somehow, he's *patient*. He doesn't expect a warm welcome just because he's making an immediate effort, and he's content with the small smiles and thanks his son spontaneously offers; he doesn't expect that by handing him a couple of gifts or sweets, the boy will climb into his arms and adore him. Luo Binghe isn't irrational, and the good thing is, neither is Luo Chengle.

When they finish breakfast, Chengle hesitates before offering to help with the dishes, and Shen Yuan sits to one side watching and not getting in the way as father and son gets suds up to their elbows, Chengle rinsing while Binghe washes.

"If you arrange from the largest to the smallest, it's safer," Luo Binghe explains in a soft voice.

Luo Chengle doesn't protest the correction. He simply nods, the tip of his tongue peeping out in concentration as he rearranges the plates. It's better this way, Shen Yuan acknowledges, gazing at them with such affection that he feels his chest is burning. Aren't they the most adorable? Aren't they truly precious?

"Did Father Emperor bring me anything from the Palace?" Chengle asks, once they've finished washing everything and Shen Yuan is taking him to change out of his pajamas. As

adorable as it is to see him in those cute Totoro pajamas, the truth is that his sweet boy needs comfortable loungewear he can wear and play in during the day.

“Your Lingling sent you some sweets,” Luo Binghe says, and it’s clear that this is almost magical for Chengle, because his whole face lights up. “And I brought you some toys for your tigers.”

“Yes!” Chengle jumps up. Shen Yuan looks at him with a raised eyebrow and, when the boy catches his eye, he lowers his head and shuffles his feet a little before saying, “Thank you, Father Emperor.”

Shen Yuan gives him a proud smile. He's about to reach out and ruffle his hair when Binghe gets there first; he hesitates for a moment, but then does it, running his fingers through Chengle's still-disheveled hair. The boy stares at him with wide, surprised eyes, just for a moment, before a spontaneous, radiant smile lights up his face.

Ah, at this rate, Shen Yuan is going to spontaneously combust. So adorable!! His sweet child may still be a wary little rascal in some ways, but after all, isn't he just a child? A sweet, tender child with a wounded heart, who only wants what every child wants: the love of his parents.

Once his son is dressed in warm, comfortable clothes, Luo Binghe takes charge of his hair. Luo Chengle is a little reluctant at first, as he always is when he has to spend more time than necessary with his father, but he relaxes soon after. Luo Binghe sprays his hair with curl-enhancing spray and begins brushing it in sections, untangling the few knots that have formed and working the hair with great care. Shen Yuan relaxes just by watching them, still in his pajamas and scratching behind the ears of a purring stuffed tiger sitting on his lap.

Only when Luo Chengle's hair is completely untangled and his curls are smooth, perfectly formed, and lustrous does Luo Binghe seem to hesitate before attempting to braid a portion of it. Shen Yuan watches them, waiting for Luo Binghe's look for help, but he doesn't—Shen Yuan can't tell if it's from pride, determination, or the need to do it himself—but he quickly seems to find a way to weave two neat braids on either side of his son’s head, then tie his hair in a high ponytail to give him more freedom of movement.

When he finally looks at Shen Yuan, he almost seems startled to see Shen Yuan looking at him, and with such a wide, radiant smile that Shen Yuan can feel his face warming up. It's like looking directly at the sun!

“Baba! Did he do it well?” Chengle asks, snapping him out of his embarrassment. Shen Yuan easily flashes a wide smile at his son, extending his arm to offer a hug, which the boy accepts, practically leaping from his father’s lap into his. The stuffed tiger lets out a whimper, but moves quickly, allowing Shen Yuan to hug Chengle tightly.

He really does have a beautiful hairstyle.

“Very, very well,” he hums, running his hand through the boy’s braids. One is a little looser than the other, and they aren’t exactly symmetrical, but it’s absolutely adorable when Shen Yuan looks up at Luo Binghe. The man has stood there, with an almost vulnerable

expression, watching them hug. “Your father has done an exceptional work, very well done. Aren’t you going to thank him?”

Luo Binghe looks away slightly, as if suddenly acting shy. Chengle pulls out of Shen Yuan's embrace just enough to glance at Luo Binghe and says in a weak, still grumbling tone, “*Thank you*.”

Shen Yuan smiles at Luo Binghe because, what else can he do? And it's the man who's looking away, playing the shy one now. Ha. As if there were any shyness in Luo Binghe among all people! Even so, Luo Binghe's ears are rosy, and Shen Yuan suddenly has to balance a very clingy little boy who's clinging to his neck, asking if they can watch Cardcaptor Sakura today too, and if they can play in the snow afterward now that Father Emperor is there to take him to the park as well…

Shen Yuan doesn't make promises. He agrees to watch more episodes of Cardcaptor Sakura, but not to go to the park; the humidity is considerably higher than usual, making his body a bit of a nightmare to move, even just standing or sitting down, let alone walking much. Yes, he might not be in as much pain as usual, *but*... Oh well. He's promised to be careful.

Introducing Luo Binghe to the world of Cardcaptor Sakura isn't difficult once he's used to watching movies. After two episodes, Shen Yuan decides that being the only one still in pajamas is something that should change, so he gives Chengle a quick kiss on the head, leaving him in his father's care with the instruction that they can watch *just* one more episode before they do something else and go take a bath. Hopefully, the hot water will help a little with his general discomfort, if it manages to keep the splint dry.

Bathing is awkward and difficult because of the plastic wrap on the splint, but he manages to make it work. Drying off is a *little* harder than usual, but when he emerges from the bath, his hair still damp and dripping onto the towel draped over his shoulders, wearing warm, comfortable clothes, he finds Chengle and Binghe playing. They've moved the low table, and they have the toys Luo Binghe brought—small wooden animals that start scampering when touched (Shen Yuan guesses they also scamper when given a little qi) and attract the attention of the stuffed tigers, who begin chasing them randomly. Shen Yuan can only be grateful that he doesn't have any rare, expensive ornaments or furniture that might be knocked over by a talisman-laden, animated stuffed tiger.

Shen Yuan doesn't interfere. He watches them for a while, simply enjoying Chengle's laughter, the way Binghe arranges the wooden animals together. Apparently, the game involves the tigers chasing after them, and somehow, they can *control* where the wooden animals go. Whoever is caught first by either of the tigers loses. It's a game only Luo Binghe and Luo Chengle, both with powerful qi, even as his son's is developing, could play together, and Shen Yuan can only feel touched that they have something *of their own*, something of theirs to share.

He's witnessed Luo Binghe's efforts to connect with his own son through all the new, modern things Luo Chengle has been enjoying and learning: his favorite movies, his preferred storybooks, his toys, and games from this world so different from their own. Seeing him connect with something so unique to their shared world has a special feeling, one that has

Shen Yuan grinning like an idiot until Chengle looks up, noticing, and completely abandons his game to run to him and tell him *everything*.

Shen Yuan lets himself be led along. Luo Binghe arranges cushions so Shen Yuan can sit beside them, and even if Shen Yuan, lacking qi, can't play, he's never minded being the observer as long as it's fun. And being with his lovely little family, watching them have fun and enjoy themselves, *is* extremely enjoyable.

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The day unfolds with a comfortable tranquility, just like the previous days, a fact that remains unchanged even with Luo Binghe present. For the first time, his presence in the apartment makes virtually no difference: there's no tension, no tantrum-throwing child, no Demon Emperor eyeing the electronics with more suspicion than disapproval. It's just Shen Yuan, Luo Binghe, and Luo Chengle, a small family functioning like any other.

It feels like any other day of playing games, watching movies, drawing, and reading, except now Luo Binghe prepares a hearty and warm lunch from scratch, its exquisite aroma filling the house and probably making all the neighbors envious. He also creates beautiful drawings that Luo Chengle colors, trying not to go outside the lines and occasionally making mistakes. He also helps with some of the activities in the book Shen Yuan has been relying on. Shen Yuan knows it will be a very different routine and that Chengle will probably *hate* going to school, but he's no trained teacher! He's barely a dad! He has no idea how to properly educate a child!

Shen Yuan feels a bit like a passive observer during their games, but Luo Chengle doesn't seem bothered by it as much as he might be. Chengle barely protests when Luo Binghe helps Shen Yuan with apply creams and massages that make everything feel lighter and hurt a little less, and in fact, he protests even less when Binghe explains step by step everything Mu Qingfang had explained. Shen Yuan finds it extremely amusing that Luo Binghe gets a secondhand massage from his son by letting him practice on him before risking squeezing too hard or being too rough with Shen Yuan. And it's true that Luo Chengle seems extremely focused on following instructions and replicating movements, and his father explains things to him patiently and carefully; Shen Yuan has to cover his face with a pillow, so his face doesn't make expressions and so neither of them sees how hard it is for him to hold back tears.

What?! A man can't be moved to tears by the care he's received from the little family he's built?! Sue him for remembering that it's okay to cry!! Or better yet, sue his therapist! Damn him!

But even if it's just an excuse to get a massage, Shen Yuan appreciates Binghe's effort to kill two birds with one stone: easing Shen Yuan's pain and including Chengle in a way that doesn't make the boy whiny or make him want to take responsibility for helping with his Baba's pain. When Luo Binghe finishes, Shen Yuan hugs his boy tightly, congratulating him on his effort, and thanks Luo Binghe *verbally*, hoping his son will always remember to say thank you, even to his foolish father.

Luo Binghe stares at him with such emotion in his eyes that Shen Yuan can only reach out and pat him on the head, thanking him again. How it ends with Luo Binghe hugging him, his head practically buried in his chest, and Chengle squirming between them in the unexpected embrace, trying to push him away and squealing over a large pile of lost points, Shen Yuan has no *idea.*

When his son and his son's father begin to argue and negotiate over marriage points (Luo Binghe holding a firm argument about how he has been doing so much for Shen Yuan's health and care as well as his happiness, and Chengle insisting that getting *so* close is totally forbidden and will nullify all the points earned for the day if he does it again without his Baba doing it first) Shen Yuan simply shuts down his brain, slipping away as soon as father and son let go of him.

By now, it's mid-afternoon. Shen Yuan doesn't have much to do except for his therapy homework, which includes his late homework from last week and the one-off task his therapist gave him for this week. Two assignments in one week, and a lot of emotions to deal with! Can't Shen Yuan ever get a break? ...although technically he's resting *the whole* time and doing absolutely nothing, but, uh... technicalities! Get the point!

Shen Yuan moves with the speed of a damn snail to the room while father and son are having their lively discussion and negotiation over points. He carries his water bottle and, after taking his afternoon medicine, simply sits on the edge of the bed, observing the room. Every poster hidden in the closet has been replaced by a large pile of drawings. Where there were once commissioned fanart pieces from various artists, there are now framed family pictures, or even unframed ones, just taped up and decorated with cute stickers that Chengle chose. Shen Yuan isn't entirely sure this is the room of a stereotypical *dad,* but it's still the room of a fan: how could he not be a fan of his own son, after all?

From sitting on the edge of the bed, he simply ends up lying down, staring at the ceiling, just breathing. Suddenly, his whole mind feels like a sieve, sifting through all logical thoughts and leaving only *feelings* behind. Shen Yuan is… emotionally overwhelmed, though he's not entirely sure *why.* It's not as if he feels like crying; it's more as if the emotions are so intense that he really just needs a moment to understand and process everything.

Ah, indeed, perhaps his mind is more similar to Ming-ge's than he expected after all. But that's a topic for his damn therapist in another session!

Now, it's really just him and the ceiling, the soft blankets behind him, his comfortable pillow. He can hear Chengle protesting in the living room, and the murmur of Luo Binghe's voice reaches him without him fully understanding the words, only the soothing tone. There's a stuffed tiger cub snoring lazily beside him on the bed, and Shen Yuan runs his fingers over its faux fur, exceptionally soft, like any good children's toy, with just the right amount of softness to make even adults like him tempted to bury their faces in the fluffy little bellies. The stuffed tiger stirs in its sleep, stretching so much that the seams look taut before it settles back into another position.

Shen Yuan is getting carried away in a spiral of *extremely* irrational thoughts regarding stuffed tigers (do they feel pain? do they feel hunger? how many real animal instincts do they actually have? do they have instincts oriented toward the form they represent, or are they

specific talismans that work to make them act like lazy cats? If the talisman were placed on an inanimate object without an animal form, would it take on some kind of life anyway?), things that could stupidly be simplified with a simple *"don't be an idiot, it's magic – or the equivalent of xianxia magic, anyway"* when he sees a small head peeking out from next to the half-open door.

"Is Baba feeling bad?" Chengle asks. He rocks back and forth a little in the door, his eyes curious, his mouth in a pout. When Shen Yuan finds the strength to shake his head, extending a hand to beckon Chengle closer, the boy comes, alternating quick steps with skips until he reaches the edge of the bed. "If Father Emperor was mean and made Baba feel bad, I can kick him far away!"

"I don't feel bad," Shen Yuan promises. And that's true, in a way. Nothing that's happened today has made him feel bad; it's just… as if his head is tired from thinking too much. "And you don't have to be rude to your father. He hasn't done anything wrong."

Luo Chengle makes an adorable pout. Shen Yuan pinches his round cheek, and the boy ends up resting his sweet little face in his hand, his big eyes filled with such deep affection that Shen Yuan feels like he's falling apart into tiny pieces. How did he manage to get such a tender child to love him so much, huh?

"Is Baba feeling sad?" Chengle asks now, his voice a little quieter. His small eyebrows furrow in concern.

Shen Yuan sighs. He runs his thumb along his son's soft cheek, observing the tender little face, worried. Even if he wants to tell him it isn't like that, isn't it really like sadness? He has no reason to be sad. He doesn't feel left out, either. In fact, he feels so overwhelmingly happy that it seems his brain has become exhausted from processing so many feelings.

"Even if I were sad," Shen Yuan hums, "it's not something that can be your fault or your father's. Do you understand that?" His sweet boy nods. Shen Yuan moves his hand away, patting the bed so his sweet boy could climb up beside him and hug him. He places a small kiss on the top of his head. "Being sad is something that will happen sometimes, through no fault of anyone and without explanation. Just as my body is acting strangely, so is my mind. But," He gently pulls his son away from the hug, just to look into his eyes. His dark eyes shine with such affection that Shen Yuan's heart aches. "This time I'm not sad. Okay? I'm just tired."

Luo Chengle nods. He snuggles closer to hug him, and Shen Yuan sighs, letting himself be embraced. What a clingy kid he really is…

And speaking of clingy. When Shen Yuan raises his head a little, he finds the door opening a crack, and another curly head peeking out.

"Is A-Yuan feeling bad?" Luo Binghe asks. Shen Yuan doesn't get a chance to answer because Chengle sits up so quickly that he startles the small, sleepy tiger beside him.

"Baba will take a nap!" Chengle says, with a broad smile. Luo Binghe tilts his head, his gaze shifting curiously between Shen Yuan and Chengle. "Father Emperor can wait *outside*."

Despite everything, Shen Yuan can only laugh. Truly, these two…

“Really?” And completely disobeying his son, Luo Binghe enters the room. “A nap is a good idea; it’s been a long day, and A-Yuan hasn’t been able to rest much. In fact, I think I should take one too.”

“No!” Chengle grabbed one of the pillows, clearly ready to defend his position. Luo Binghe, obviously, didn't seem intimidated at *all* by his son and a mere pillow, continuing forward with nonchalant steps. “Baba will take a nap. *With me.* I'll stay and take care of Baba!”

“But I’d also like a nap,” Luo Binghe continued, getting so close he was just an arm’s length away from being hit with a pillow. “I’ve been cooking and cleaning for *so long*. I took good care of A-Yuan and played with Chengle all afternoon without a single break. Don’t I deserve a little nap?”

“Yes,” Luo Chengle says, his voice firm, “but far away. Far away!”

Luo Binghe stares directly in his direction. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

“You both are unbelievable,” he mutters, complaining. He sits up just enough to pull the pillow out of Chengle’s grasp before his son attacks his father, and his father feels morally obligated to defend himself by starting a pillow fight that Shen Yuan is far too tired to be in the middle of. “Chengle, honey, why don’t we all just cuddle up and take a nap?”

“I’m not sleepy!” Chengle complains, quickly glaring at him. It’s just that small distraction that’s all it takes for Luo Binghe to take the few steps to the bed and catch Chengle in his arms. The boy squeals, trying to bite him, but only manages to squirm helplessly in his grasp as Luo Binghe gently lifts him up, sitting on the bed with the child in his arms.

“I think so,” Shen Yuan says, because it’s *clear* Chengle hasn’t taken a nap, and while he doesn’t usually need them, it’s true that his mood is much better afterward. Even more so if he’s been playing all day. “Don’t you want to take a nap with your father and me?”

It takes a little convincing him. Finally, Luo Chengle seems resigned to the fact that it will happen whether he likes it or not, so even if reluctantly, he agrees. Shen Yuan can only think how adorable father and son look trying to negotiate the terms and conditions of a simple nap. Perhaps he really needs a nap if he's finding this little argument so endearing.

While the bed is large enough for Shen Yuan and Chengle—though Shen Yuan sometimes wakes up quite kicked around and other times his child wakes him up tugging to retrieve the blankets Shen Yuan has stolen—it's true that getting Binghe to fit is a considerable effort. Luo Binghe lies down first, and Shen Yuan ends up tangled in his arms, with Chengle not even touching the mattress, essentially using his oh great and mighty Father Emperor as both mattress and pillow. They haven't even finished settling in when some of the stuffed tigers appear, jumping onto the bed and butting heads until they find a place to settle.

It's not that Shen Yuan is *particularly* sleepy, really. The exhaustion is more mental than physical, but even so, he finds it easy to relax and feel comfortable in Luo Binghe's warm arms, both of them cradling their son. Chengle, who had insisted so much that he didn't need

a nap, is the first to fall asleep as soon as they settle in, and Shen Yuan can only gaze at him with an adoring smile.

Luo Binghe runs one of his hands through his son's hair, a constant caress that doesn't stop even after his son has fallen asleep. Shen Yuan lifts his head to look at him, finding Luo Binghe gazing at Chengle's sleeping face with the gentlest expression, a small, tender smile rising at the corner of his lips.

Even when Luo Binghe isn't looking at him, Shen Yuan can feel that gaze relaxing him, something in that expression erupting deep within in his chest. It burns in his throat, and he blinks, fighting off the urge to cry. He really is… he is so…

“A-Yuan?” Luo Binghe whispers in his direction, looking at him. There’s a soft concern on his face, and Shen Yuan shakes his head, settling in closer.

“I’m *so* happy,” Shen Yuan whispers, practically without thinking, just feeling.

He has no more words. Luo Binghe doesn't ask either, just holding him so close there isn't even a point of distance between them. Their legs are interlaced, their son asleep between them, and Shen Yuan closes his eyes, feeling like he's in a place where he truly belongs, completely and utterly happy about it.

Chapter End Notes

LBH: Ah, unfortunately, we couldn't find whoever poisoned my troublesome wife...
LBH, also at the palace: I know it was you
MQF: Are Junshang going to do anything about it?
LBH: I'll give you a raise

at the palace
LBH: I'll dissolve the harem
SHL: Damn it
LBH: ???
SHL: I owe Mobei. He bet it would be before the New Year celebration. I bet it would be after because you'd want to show off Yuanyuan to the other wives before getting rid of them
LBH: Damn it
SHL: ???
LBH: I hadn't thought of that

SHEN YUAN IS SO, SO CLOSE. WELCOME TO LIFE OUT OF THE CLOSET, SWEETIE. YOU'VE ALREADY ACCEPTED NOT ONLY THAT YOU'RE VERY GAY, BUT HOW GAY YOU ARE BECAUSE OF THAT MAN. NOW GO FOR HIM!!!! WE ALL SUPPORT YOU!! Yes, your son may SLIGHTLY disagree, BUT HE KNOWS THAT WILL HAPPEN AT SOME POINT!!!!

Ah, I missed writing quiet, sweet things with Chengle. Sweet boy, he deserves the world and now he has TWO dads who are willing to give it to him. I'm so happy for him *sobs*

Shen Yuan is doing his best not to look like a lovesick fool. Luo Binghe is doing his best not to kiss Shen Yuan every time he's the best person in the world to him. Bets are on the table, who will give in first and succumb to temptation? ;P

I'm extremely happy with this chapter, even though it was difficult for me to write (I think I've mentioned it, but the December blues are hitting me miserably hard. The only positive thing I get out of this are my other two fics with extremely depressing POVs/hj), it makes me extremely happy to finally place Shen Yuan in a place where he's more comfortable with everything. Of course, the drama aren't over for him, and we still have SEVERAL chapters ahead and a whole romantic arc to develop, but knowing that he's made it this far after all fills me with pride. Feels for a fictional character as if he were real, yes, I'm not sorry

MWAH. Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed the chapter! You know we're just a kudo-comment-interaction away, and I'm always checking the comments. I'm SO grateful for all the support you give me, you truly have no idea how much it means to me. Thank you so much! :'D
See you soon! :3

End Notes

Thanks you so much for reading!! :3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!